

The North Hampshire Wine Society Blog



'Wines from California' Presented by James Hocking 23 February 2011

Vineyard Cellars is part of the group that owns the luxury restaurant/hotel The Vineyard at Stockcross. According to the website www.vineyardcellars.com Vineyard Cellars was established 8 years ago as an online Californian wine specialist.

Welcome aperitif

One member was heard to guess that this was 'an innocuous Italian variety'! Pretty close – this was apparently a relatively elderly Soave with a rather dark colour. I'm afraid I didn't get a look at the label.

The wines

These wines would have been new to many of us, so it was an opportunity to widen our collective palates and to see what California is producing at present. A useful little catalogue was provided with background notes on the producers covered (plus the odd quote/score from one R.Parker). Prices below are those quoted to us on the night.

Whites

Schramsberg Vineyards Blanc de Blancs 2006, Calistoga, Napa Valley

£23.83 12.9%

A Californian sparkler to get the evening going. Some development on the nose but not so much in the colour – still a greenish-yellow with a nice persistent mousse. Nose yeasty but fresh. Some viscosity (legs) on the glass. Frothy bubbles (a Californian trait), quite rich and mouth-filling, citrus in the background and some acidity on the finish. My notes say 'a more astringent finish than the mid-palate suggests'. Not perhaps bone-dry, but difficult to tell as served a little warm. Length reasonable. Generally liked by the group.

Honig Vineyards Sauvignon Blanc 2008, Napa Valley

£13.20

A Californian sauvignon was bound to be interesting and it was. Grapes from Rutherford in the Napa Valley. Very obvious to me after the yeasty nose of wine 1 was a bubblegum and banana character on this nose. But the palate was different, with dryness and just a hint of minerality apparent. The difference here with the sort of sauvignons we are used to in the UK (whether restrained French or big fruity Chilean or NZ) is the ripeness and roundness and general 'big' mouthfeel. This is not your high-acidity bracing gooseberry bush style – in fact it's quite hard to detect a hint of it - and the acidity is very muted. It did open out in the glass and lost some of its early 'artificial' nose. But to me it looked pricey at £13.20 even for California.

Ferrari-Carano Fume Blanc 2009, Sonoma County

£14.40

Often when a winery is much hyped it's tricky to come to the actual wine with a totally open mind – one way or another reputation can colour perception. But since I had never heard of Ferrari-Carano before this tasting I had no preconceived ideas, other than being a bit of a fan of Sonoma generally! A smart move to show this straight after the Honig sauvignon I thought, given the similar prices but very different treatment of the sauvignon grape. My note says 'that's more like it!' Free run juices from cooler climate grapes (including some from Russian

River Valley) gave this a freshness and vibrancy lacking in the previous wine. 'Fume' = barrel fermentation so that adds complexity, but the oak has had a light hand here, adding just a touch of smokiness and depth. If only all fume blancs were this subtle! Zingy and fresh, a slight spritz on the palate, very obvious minerality. I took a third of a bottle home and the next evening it had lost nothing. Much more interesting than wine 2 at a very similar price.

Reds

Waterstone Pinot Noir 2007, Carneros District

£17.92

Futile to expect any Californian Pinot Noir to be cheap, and certainly not when made with Carneros grapes, but at £18 there are some pretty nice New World pinots around now so comparisons are inevitable. Sadly one bottle was faulty with raging volatile acidity (re-fermentation) so we just had the one small sample each from the other bottle. Smoky, faintly menthol nose. Seemed absolutely mature and ready, though only 2007. Rounded but with a dry austere finish. One of us commented that 'it would take Burgundy 10 years to reach this stage'. Divided opinion in the group.

Mandolin Vineyards Syrah 2008, Monterey

£10.00

3% Viognier in the mix here – it's becoming very fashionable to do this with Syrah in the new world, following Rhone tradition. We're in warmer Monterey here and the rubbery nose of the Syrah comes through strongly with just a little pleasant development. Very deep purple, no rim, deep core. This is an entry level wine (at £10!) and not intended for keeping - no real tannic structure, all fruit and spice. Round and ripe, limited finish. Very drinkable, and many of us thought especially successful with the chive cheese and the pate.

Hendry Ranch Block 7/22 Zinfandel 2006, Napa Valley

£22.60 **15.6%!**

There just had to be a big Zin... Showing some age on the rim. A surprisingly austere palate, lots of 'structure' here, in a direct contrast to the previous wine. Not at all 'sweet' on the palate in the way that many Californian wines tend towards. Alcohol (inevitably) very evident on the finish suggesting perhaps a slight lack of balance? *Really* needs food! I thought the quality of the finish a tad disappointing, but it clearly has life ahead of it so maybe it will still develop.

Justin Vineyards 'The Orphan' 2007, Paso Robles

£12.90

An interesting choice to show this wine last – 'just' £12.90 so you would think perhaps it might suffer by comparison with the previous wine. Not at all. A Syrah/Cabernet blend, apparently quite common in California although not (yet) so much elsewhere. Classic Cabernet nose, minty and restrained. More Cab than Syrah in the blend? The screwcap retains the fruit, but there's also good structure and vitality here. Acidity excellent and overall seemed well-balanced (better acidity/fruit balance than the Mandolin Syrah). Good value for California and justified its position as the final red we thought.

Sticky

Domaine de la Terre Rouge Muscat a Petit Grains 2004, Shenendoah Valley

[no price quoted]

Billed as a Californian Muscat de Beaumes de Venise but sadly without either the intensity or the 'muscattiness' that you associate with that splendid southern Rhone wine. Grape spirit evident, but the wine was not really all of a piece and seemed quite dilute. Many of us thought it was disappointingly lacking in 'Muscat' character. Perhaps not California's best style.