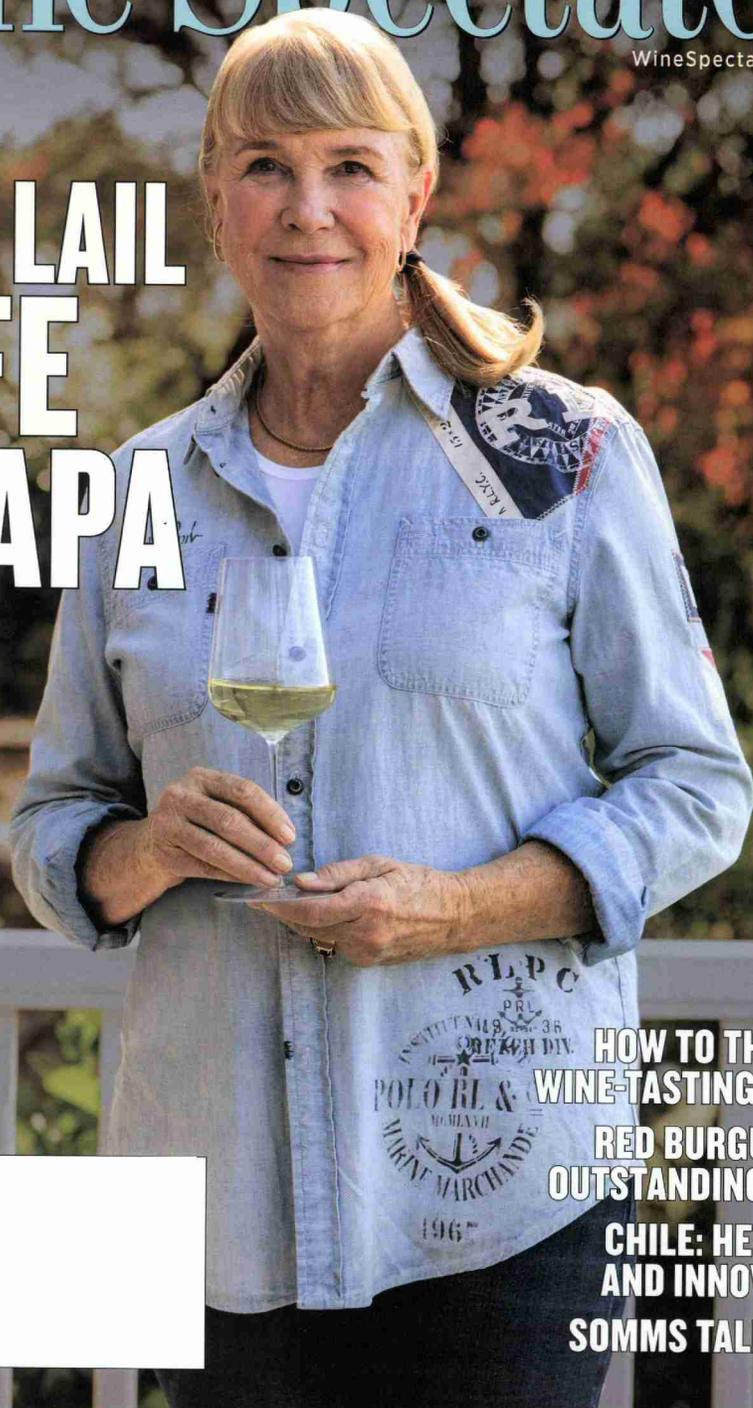


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A Golden Age for Sauvignon Blanc

Experimentation in the vineyard and cellar is pushing quality forward in California

BY MARYANN WOROBIEC

Sauvignon Blanc is undergoing a transformation in the Golden State, and the effects are thrilling to observe. The variety has become one of the most exciting white wines in California, delivering expressive, food-friendly versions that have winemakers and wine drinkers taking note.

Over the past few years I've reported on various aspects of Sauvignon Blanc's quality uptick, such as the seriousness with which the variety is being farmed and the new winemaking techniques being employed; the increase of single-vineyard and block-specific bottlings; and the range of styles on offer. Now I'm noticing two other trends: a push to experiment with multiple bottlings to show off different expressions; and a greater focus on ageability.

All of these bets are paying off in impressive fashion. Nearly a third of the 170 wines I have reviewed in blind tastings at our Napa office since my previous report ("Sauvignon Blanc Revolution," Sept. 30, 2019) earned scores of 90 points or higher on the *Wine Spectator* 100-point scale, while nearly all of them rated at least 85 points, reflecting the overall quality and reliability of the category. (A free alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available at WineSpectator.com/SauvignonBlancAlpha053120.)

Though California Sauvignon Blanc lacks a signature style, some of the best wines have a satisfying, succulent texture that is a trademark of the state. Yet what defines the wines is their diversity, ranging from bright and zingy (reminiscent of New Zealand) to richer examples inspired by Bordeaux. You can typically expect light- to medium-bodied whites that are aromatic, with the grape's signature crisp acidity shining through, and though they tend to show plenty of citrus and stone fruit flavors, riper examples can veer toward tropical notes of pineapple or mango. I often find herbal, floral or mineral accents as well.

Vintners are inspired by this spectrum. It's not unusual these days to see producers making a range of wines to express different shades of the grape. At Dry Creek Vineyard, winemaker Tim Bell ferments 75 different lots into six separate bottlings each year. "We want to show different faces and flavors of Sauvignon Blanc," says owner Kim Stare Wallace. Their selection includes the Sauvignon Blanc Dry Creek Valley 2018 (90 points, \$20), with grassy, herbal notes to its succulent flavors, and the fresh and juicy Fumé Blanc Sonoma County 2018 (87, \$16).

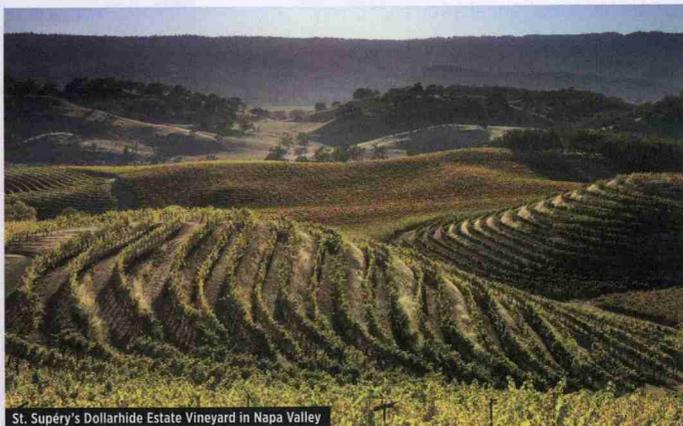
Over a glass of Dry Creek's Fumé Blanc from 1990, Wallace discusses her experience aging Sauvignon Blanc. "One of the things we find that happens [with aged Sauvignon Blanc] is that it takes on the smells of a great Italian deli—green olive, basil and rosemary notes take over where citrus flavors once were."

Another vintner focused on ageability is Bibiana González Rave, who makes Sauvignon Blanc under two brands, her own Cattleya and a collaboration with her husband, Jeff Pisoni, called Shared Notes. "The objective is to focus on wines that can age," she says about the latter project. There are two bottlings: the Bordeaux-inspired Sauvignon

Blanc-Sémillon Russian River Valley Les Leçons des Maîtres 2018 (93, \$65) and the Loire-style Sauvignon Blanc Russian River Valley Les Pierres Qui Décident 2018 (90, \$65).

For Rave, building a wine with the potential to age starts in the vineyard. "One of the biggest challenges is to convince growers that it doesn't need to be 12 tons per acre," she says, explaining that the grape lends itself to prolific yields but that she prefers to limit the crop to 4 tons per acre. Her next decision comes at picking time. "I want to preserve the acidity. The ageability of any wine is dependent on that."

Unlike most Sauvignon Blanc producers, Rave also sorts out grapes on the table before press. She then ferments the wines in 100% new



St. Supéry's Dollarhide Estate Vineyard in Napa Valley

French oak, eight months on the lees. She has migrated away from neutral oak over time, discovering that entirely new barrels give her the texture and aromatics she prefers. The wines, she explains, "become softer, gain more volume."

St. Supéry's Michael Scholz points out that the drink window for Sauvignon Blanc depends on the style of the wine. Of the winery's three bottlings, only its Virtú Napa Valley (90, \$35) is intentionally styled to age more extensively in order to showcase the Sémillon in the blend. Scholz prefers shorter drink windows for the other two: from three to 15 months after bottling for the Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley 2018 (90, \$22) and from six to 18 months for the Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley Dollarhide 2018 (92, \$35). The Dollarhide also incorporates some barrel fermentation and *sur lie* aging, potentially leading the wine to take on some signs of maturity. "I like this window a lot," he says. "The wine shows some softening and width, with really nice complexity."

But not every winemaker has an eye on the cellar. "My favorite Sauvignon Blancs are of the greener, more acidic style—and the younger the better," says Marty Mathis of Kathryn Kennedy. "To my palate, most California Sauvignon Blancs are grown in too warm or dry of a site, [making them] too high in alcohol and too ripe in fruit flavor. Which leads to my impression that more bottle time does not improve these wines."

Danielle Cyrot, winemaker at Cade, agrees. "I am not a huge fan of extended cellar time for Sauvignon Blanc," she says. "I think the beauty

of the varietal lies in its freshness and aromatic complexity. Too long in the cellar and that starts to diminish."

No matter their wine style, winemakers across the state are using techniques previously reserved for more "serious" wines. I'm seeing more wild yeast fermentations, whole-cluster presses and additional lees contact. There's also plenty of experimentation with fermentation vessels.

At Dry Creek, Bell showed me trials he's doing with acacia and chestnut barrels. "Oak barrels can cover up Sauvignon Blanc," he explains. "Chestnut doesn't cover it up, and acacia adds a floral quality and a subtle, slightly wax body richness."

Cyrot at Cade is working with concrete. "If I could fill my cellar with concrete eggs, I would, but I don't have the space for them," she says. "Fermenting in concrete brings a different textural component to the wine. It is like combining stainless steel and French oak into one. You get the aromatic purity of the grape by fermenting in concrete, but concrete also adds a creamy, yogurt, crème brûlée-type texture to the wine."

Both of these examples are representative of

the statewide trend away from the overt oak influences that once made California Sauvignon Blancs seem like Chardonnay knockoffs. Among the many fresh, crisp versions without any oak influence, some of the most affordable and widely available include the Château St. Jean Sauvignon Blanc California 2017 (90, \$13) and Joel Gott Sauvignon Blanc California 2018 (89, \$12).

I'm also seeing elegant expressions whose use of oak is more judicious, taking inspiration from Bordeaux. In fact, many of the year's top-scoring wines are modeled after Bordeaux blanc. Peter Michael Knights Valley L'Après-Midi 2018 (94, \$64) blends in 10% Sémillon. Hall Sauvignon Blanc Knights Valley 2018 (94, \$35) and Lail Napa Valley Georgia 2017 (93, \$155) are both varietal Sauvignon Blancs, the former aged for nine months in 25% new French oak, the latter aged for 18 months in 100% new French oak. Each of these wines shows tremendous complexity and balance.

With such a diverse array of wines to choose from, it's a good time to give California Sauvignon Blanc another look. □



Cade winemaker Danielle Cyrot

MARYANN WOROBIEC'S RECOMMENDED CALIFORNIA SAUVIGNON BLANCS

Nearly 175 wines were reviewed for this report. A free alphabetical list is available at WineSpectator.com/SauvignonBlancAlpha053120. WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

WINE	SCORE	PRICE	WINE	SCORE	PRICE
HALL Sauvignon Blanc Knights Valley 2018 This stylish white strikes an ideal balance between richness and vibrancy, with lemon curd, orange sherbet and dried apricot notes.	94	\$35	QUIVIRA Sauvignon Blanc Dry Creek Valley Fig Tree Vineyard 2018 Verbena, beeswax and matcha green tea notes give way to a polished core of lemon curd, lanolin and quince. Intense and focused.	93	\$24
PETER MICHAEL Sauvignon Blanc Knights Valley L'Après-Midi 2018 Succulent flavors are set on a supple and fleshy texture in this version, with pure and refreshing acidity. Balances elegance and power.	94	\$64	SHARED NOTES Sauvignon Blanc-Sémillon Russian River Valley Les Leçons des Maîtres 2018 This complex version offers rich flavors of peach cobbler, honeysuckle and honeycomb, set against vibrant acidity. Fragrant and intense.	93	\$65
DESPARADA Sauvignon Blanc York Mountain Vela Chelle Mountain 2018 This distinctive white packs a wallop of intensity, with generous and vibrant flavors of orange blossom, Key lime and ruby grapefruit.	93	\$40	ACUMEN Sauvignon Blanc Atlas Peak Peak 2018 Aromatic flavors lend nuance to a core of peach, mango and coconut water. The supple frame and detailed finish add to the charm.	92	\$75
MERRY EDWARDS Sauvignon Blanc Russian River Valley 2018 Features a core of nectarine, apricot and lemon zest flavors set on a succulent, fleshy frame, ending with a long, expressive finish.	93	\$36	SPOTTSWOOD Sauvignon Blanc Sonoma-Napa Counties 2018 Lemon meringue, spice and grapefruit flavors reveal whiffs of lanolin and spice in the background. Balances focus and intensity.	92	\$42
GAMBLE FAMILY Sauvignon Blanc Yountville Gamble Vineyard 2018 Intriguing notes of candied ginger and marmalade lead to a fresh mix of Asian pear, white grapefruit and peach flavors. Appealingly precise.	93	\$28	ST. SUPÉRY Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley Dollarhide 2018 This white is stylish and vibrant, with mouthwatering cantaloupe, Creamsicle and pear flavors that are supple, juicy and harmonious.	92	\$35
LAIL Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley Georgia 2017 This focused version features a laser beam of lemon curd, peach and honeysuckle flavors on a succulent frame, with a crisp, vibrant finish.	93	\$155	DRY CREEK Sauvignon Blanc Dry Creek Valley 2018 Embraces grassy, herbal notes of dried lemon verbena and lemon-grass that mingle well with succulent lemon, peach and dried apricot.	90	\$20
ROBERT MONDAVI Fumé Blanc Oakville To Kalon Vineyard Reserve 2017 An aromatic mix of honeysuckle, lemon curd and dried mango is set on a rich body, with fresh acidity keeping the flavors light-footed.	93	\$55	JOEL GOTT Sauvignon Blanc California 2018 Passion fruit, Key lime and orange sherbet flavors show good intensity and tangy acidity, with lemon verbena and lemon zest details.	89	\$12
JOSEPH PHELPS Sauvignon Blanc St. Helena 2018 Offers ripe peach, apricot and marmalade flavors on a smooth, lush frame, with spice and floral details gliding along on the juicy finish.	93	\$45	CHARLES KRUG Sauvignon Blanc St. Helena 2018 Succulent peach and mango flavors are freshly juicy, showing good intensity and focus, with a touch of green tea on the finish.	89	\$18