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The Chronicle Recommends: Napa Valley Cabernet

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Napa Valley was in a good mood coming out of 2007. It had been a relatively mild summer, and a bit of post-Labor Day rain slowed down final ripening. The promise was one of restraint and elegance, a pulling in of the reins.

Would that be reflected in the wines? And would anyone buy?

As we turned to our annual panel of Napa Valley Cabernets, we faced a continued headwind against high-end wines. Still, this is the one sort of wine that I've always argued is worth a splurge - within reason, of course, and not to give into the price spiraling of recent years that now appears to have had the stability of Jack's beanstalk. Would these be nuanced wines that could justify a stay in the cellar?

For this tasting, I was joined by three helpers: Daniel Dawson, owner of Backroom Wines in Napa; Zach Pace, wine director of Foreign Cinema in San Francisco; and Anya Balistreri, wine buyer for the Wine House in San Francisco. We considered nearly 80 current releases from the 2007 vintage. (Having asked for current releases, we received a lot of 2006s, evidence that plenty of older wine remains in the pipeline.)

We found wines that succeeded, but restraint wouldn't be the word I'd choose. Even in our favorites we encountered very ripe flavors and gobs of alcoholic heat.

Sure, these are big, young wines, worth holding back for a while. But we tasted too many that seemed woefully off balance: acidity gone missing, tannins sanded down to a nub, fruit that tasted reconstituted. These shortcomings might be understandable in cheaper wine. But at, say, \$50 a bottle, you deserve fruit that bursts with promise.

It was no surprise many of our favorites were finished in less new oak than has become typical in Napa - less than 50 percent, let's say. That wasn't a requirement for success, but it did seem that the fascination with flashy new wood might be wavering - a welcome shift, if in fact it is a trend being born.

I suspect Napa Cabs are in a transitional phase. There's still clearly value in a having hefty signature, and clearly money to be made from it. Yet there are the murmurs of restraint.

Napa's biggest strength has always been its nearly magic ability to grow Cabernet. If we're moving

toward wines that celebrate that, while shedding the winemaking fat they've gained in recent years, fantastic. I'm not sure 2007 fully reflects that transition, but it offers some promising hints.

2007 Buehler Estate Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$34) Year in and year out, Buehler presents a real Napa Cabernet - no silly makeup, no crazy oak - at a just-right price tag. The 2007, harvested starting late September, is a treat. The nose is all dark notes: espresso, tree bark, black cherry juice. But the taste is almost racy in its energy, with a lift to roasted plum and cocoa flavors. A deep-water Cab that speaks with authority.

2007 Chappellet Signature Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$47) Chappellet's mainline effort was a standout again, this time with a big dose of Malbec (18 percent) that brings out lively violet aromas. There's plenty of oak in the mix, but move past it to find bright plum and cassis fruit, with graphite accents. It's bulky in its texture, with lots of tannin that calls for a good decanting or a couple years in the bottle. A bit of Petite Verdot, Cabernet Franc and Merlot add extra complexity to this fine Pritchard Hill effort.

2007 Robert Craig Mount Veeder Cabernet Sauvignon (\$70) From a 1,800-foot-elevation parcel along the Veeder ridge, this well-defined, no-fat effort shows lots of ripe plum and clean blackberry, a slightly savory wood note and some pretty herbal underbrush. It gets further depth from a lovely black-tea note, perhaps from the 17 percent Merlot. Ample tannins show its potential over the next decade.

2007 Fontanella Mount Veeder Cabernet Sauvignon (\$50) After a path through such cellars as Opus One, Jeff Fontanella and his wife, Karen, established this new Mount Veeder label. It's framed by a delicate, cocoa-tinged profile, with bright blueberry and blackberry and perfumed highlights. It's about nuance, with supple tannins and a black-tea-like bite that hints at 8 percent Merlot in the bottle.

2007 Tor Kenward Cimarossa Vineyard Howell Mountain Cabernet Sauvignon (\$75) Winemaker Jeff Ames turned out stellar 2007 results for the Tor label, including this from one of Howell Mountain's rising-star vineyards. It's dark and spicy, intense with sweet cassis, raspberry high tones, aromas of cassia, dark mineral and chewy, ripe tannins that make it a bit of a brawler. But there's tons of generous fruit to give it 10-plus years' distance. Tor's more delicate Mast Vineyard bottling (\$75) from Yountville is just as good.

2007 Cliff Lede Stags Leap District Cabernet Sauvignon (\$60) There's pleasing austerity to this latest release from Lede, one of the newer labels energizing Stags Leap. That should give it the potential to blossom in the next three to five years. Lots of charming coffee bean and tobacco accents, with a Bordeaux-like dark mineral edge, plus some brighter red cherry highlights, deep cassis and a stiff, broad carpet of tannin.

2007 Martin Ray Stags Leap District Cabernet Sauvignon (\$55) This Santa Rosa negotiant

brought Cabernet fruit over the mountains to produce a standout Stags Leap effort. Generous roasted cherry and cassis fruit get more interesting with a savory profile of burnt leaves, graphite and coffee. It's on the brooding side, with a pretty mineral lift and refinement to the char-like tannins.

2007 Merryvale Starmont Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$27) A lighter touch with new oak brings out deeply extracted black cherry flavors and solid food-friendly tannins, edged by alluring olive and coffee accents that round out the black-fruit scents. Drink it young but give it some air.

2007 Miner Stagecoach Vineyard Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$65) This hillside vineyard east of Oakville grows unapologetically brawny, well-loved fruit, yet winemaker Gary Brookman found an expression that pleasantly pushes in the stops a bit. Subtle sandalwood, bright black cherry, with dark mineral edges and a vibrant profile that keeps momentum amid big, chewy tannins. A subtle hand at work.

2007 Robert Mondavi Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$29) The Mondavi winery's mainline offering was a winner for the vintage, further signs that winemaker Genevieve Janssens is preserving the quality of this label. A big dose of smoky oak, but it sorts out to solid espresso, toast and roasted blackberry scents, with a juicy fruit profile and fine, lingering tannins. On the hefty side (15.5 percent alcohol), but delivers with impact.

2007 Prime Cellars District 4 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$39) Ted Henry (Jarvis) turned out an impressive textbook Cabernet for his own label from Coombsville-area fruit. The acidity's a bit forward - in a good way - giving a tension to notes of tobacco, blackberry leaves and coffee bean. The oak is subtle, and taut blackberry fruit is held together by firm tannins.

2007 Round Pond Rutherford Cabernet Sauvignon (\$50) An ageworthy effort from the MacDonnell family's Rutherford estate. Right now an earthy note opens things, but that leads to intriguing notes of ripe plum, graphite and ground coffee. Layered, nuanced, and stylish.

2007 Terra Valentine Spring Mountain District Cabernet Sauvignon (\$40) The Terra Valentine lineup shone in the tasting, demonstrating this Spring Mountain estate's potential. Its mainline Cab bottling delivers a ton of presence. Dark tree-bark and black olive bite, with cocoa powder and cassis. Chewy, dense and powerful. Also a standout was the mouth-filling Yverdon bottling (\$70), with its distinct stony mineral presence.

2007 Trincherro Chicken Ranch Vineyard Rutherford Cabernet Sauvignon (\$35) With help from winemaker Mario Monticelli, the Trincherros are getting serious about their single-vineyard efforts. Produced from a parcel on the edge of St. Helena (now the site of Joel Gott's Ranch facility) this shows off the subtlety of valley-floor fruit done right. Filled with a juicy plum note, plus accents of dried leaves and graphite. Forty-five percent new French oak needs time to

fold in, but it's a classic, seamless profile with solid herb-edged tannins.

2007 York Creek Estate Spring Mountain District Cabernet Sauvignon (\$48) Fritz Maytag's longtime Spring Mountain property has long been a source of complex Cabernet, and the 2007 shows its terroir in a fine year. A distinct graphite component comes forward amid nuanced oak (70 percent new). That adds depth to blackberry, black cherry and blue fruit. There's an endearing savory quality, with a rich blanket of tannins. Give it a good three years or more in the cellar.

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