

CABERNET SUPERLIST | BEST CHAMPAGNES | BASQUE AND TUSCAN SMALL-PLATE FEASTS

# Wine & Spirits



## COLLECTOR'S CLASSICS

- 2001 **Barolo & Barbaresco**
- 2002 **California Cabernet**
- 2003 **Vintage Porto**
- 2004 **Mosel Riesling**

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# COLLECTING DUST

2002 Rutherford Cabernet Sauvignon



photos by Marvin Collins



by Rod Smith



There's more to the annual Rutherford Dust Society tasting than just a coalition of wine producers presenting their wares. It's simply the most significant regional tasting on the California wine calendar.

The two dozen wines at this year's tasting, all from the 2002 vintage, demonstrated yet again that Rutherford cabernet sauvignons (and cabernet -dominant blends) are the most consistently convincing —and collectible—wines California has to offer.

That's not to detract from the thirteen other AVAs within Napa Valley. Each has its own luminosity, and all are moving toward the kind of stylistic definition claimed by individual Bordeaux communes. For example, Stags Leap District and Calistoga produce distinctive fruit characteristics that mavens love to pick out in blind tastings, and Oakville has an inordinate share of the megahyped cult estates that have proliferated in the last decade. Yet none have Rutherford's unique combination of historical importance, sheer number of long-established wineries and vineyards and sharply honed viticultural identity.

If Napa Valley is the homeland of New World cabernet sauvignon, and it unmistakably is, then Rutherford is its capital.

**W**hy Rutherford? There are a number of reasons. The quasi-town of that name isn't one of them, by the way—it barely exists. But the nature of the place where Thomas B. Rutherford and his young bride settled in 1864 certainly is a factor: It's one of the best places in the world to grow cabernet sauvignon.

Historians have always debated whether the valley's viticultural pioneers knew what they were doing. One school of thought holds that the people who began planting commercial vineyards in the Napa Valley some 140 years ago picked their sites haphazardly. Settlers planted vines wherever they happened to find themselves, goes that argument; the Napa Valley simply turned out to be better for wine than most places.

Another point of view (and I'm in this camp) holds that those people planted their vines wisely, in places where they knew the fruit would be not only bountiful but fine, and that the grape varieties that came to dominate the plantings vintage by vintage were those that showed affinities for certain sites. The random-planting school points out that those early vigneron had no access to the powerful tools of site assessment, such as neutron probes and satellite imaging, available to modern viticulturists. That's certainly true. But then, neither did the people who planted the vines at Château Haut-Brion in the 16th century, nor the monks who planted the Côte d'Or nearly a thousand years ago.

Thomas Rutherford might not have understood the potential quality of wines made from his grapes. Viticulture and winemaking practices have so much to do with fruit character and how it translates into the bottle, and both have improved significantly since the mid-19th century. But the noble vine has always had a way of embracing honest farmers while baffling scientists, and it wouldn't have taken a Ph.D. to see that the fine soils and remarkably sweet climate at the heart of that paradisiacal valley were ideal for growing wine. Vignerons such as Georges de Latour, Gustave Niebaum and John Daniel definitely saw the potential in Rutherford-area grapes, and they capitalized on it.

**T**hree large alluvial fans (one on the west side, two on the east) make up most of the 6.6-square-mile Rutherford AVA. Seen from the air, or even from one of the steep knolls that pass for foothills in the relatively small-scale coastal ranges such as the Mayacamas, these fans are spreading aprons of grayish or red-gray dirt that is distinct from the darker, heavier soil typical of the valley floor. On the west side of the AVA, they overlay a slightly raised bench, or ancient riverbank, which is an ideally sloped and perfectly drained platform for viticulture.

This platform is situated at a point in the valley where the climate is closely calibrated to the needs of *Vitis vinifera*, particularly cabernet sauvignon. That's what the pioneers and their successors discovered. In time, similar sites were discovered and planted on the east side of the AVA, hard against the Vaca Range—acclaimed vineyards such as Caymus and Beckstoffer, for example. And barely a decade ago Agustin and Valeria Huneus developed the Quintessa vineyard and winery along the Silvera-

do Trail, on ground never before planted to grapes. Now fast-forward to the early 21st century: Nearly 90 percent of the Rutherford AVA is planted to red Bordeaux grapes, and well over half of that is cabernet sauvignon. Rutherford's 2,253 acres of cabernet account for nearly 20 percent of the total Napa Valley cabernet acreage.

History and location alone don't make a great appellation. There also has to be a common vision that leads to cohesive viticultural identity. Identifiable character has to come from a discrete, self-referential grape-growing and winemaking culture. It doesn't have to mean that all the growers and winemakers are doing things the same way, but rather that each is finding their own way to an expression of cabernet sauvignon that is understood to be Rutherfordian.

That comes in large part from an increasingly refined roster of cabernet clones and selections. In the past decade or so, all of California's top vineyards have been fine-tuned with carefully selected plant material. The process was accelerated by widespread replanting due to phylloxera, which coincided with the availability of new clones and selections of cabernet. It's particularly advanced in the Rutherford AVA, where the prevalence of a few outstanding clones and selections contributes greatly to the AVA's viticultural identity.

They all originated in Bordeaux, of course, but have taken different routes to Napa Valley through the University of California at Davis. Clone 4, also called the Mendoza clone, was imported from Argentina. The Jackson clone, or Clone 6, was planted in the 1880s at a UC Davis field station in the Sierra Foothills. That vineyard was then abandoned until Dr. Austin Goheen rediscovered it in 1963, when he took cuttings for propagation. Both clones emerged from Beaulieu Vineyard clonal trials in the late 1980s and are rapidly becoming the clones of choice for top-end cabernet plantings in Rutherford—Clone 6, in particular, is the subject of single-clone bottlings by several producers. There's also UCD Clone 29, originally selected from vines descended through propagation from the original Gustave Niebaum planting.

While the mix of clones and selections that defines Rutherford vineyards becomes ever more distinctive, there remains considerable diversity in individual winemaking regimens. Yet Rutherford winemakers seem to share a common ideal of finished wine that is moving them toward the kind of closely defined winemaking culture that characterizes classic European appellations.

At one extreme, for example, Scott McLeod prefers not to inoculate fermentation of the Niebaum-Coppola estate wines, especially the Cask Cabernet Sauvignon and the tête de cuvée called Rubicon. The wines are produced in the original 19th-century Gustave Niebaum winery, meticulously restored and discreetly modernized. Grapes from the historic vine blocks surrounding the winery are hand-sorted on a stainless steel sorting table, then fermented in open-top oak tanks as in days of yore. The caps are punched down with handheld pneumatic pistons that are very high-tech yet look like jackhammers as envisioned by Jules Verne. In this case, according to McLeod, tradition trumps technology: Where other winemakers routinely dealcoholize their wines using the expensive spinning cone (centrifuge) process, he says, "my alcohol levels



John Williams, Frog's Leap

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can drop a point and a half just by evaporation.”

By contrast, Provenance winemaker Tom Rinaldi is firmly in the wine-making-means-you-make-the-wine camp. He won't hesitate to add yeast, acid or, as he told the assembled journalists at the Rutherford Dust Society tasting, oak chips. “I've found that adding oak chips to the must at the crusher goes after any green flavors that might be there,” he said. “Believe it or not, it really works.” He also routinely dealcoholizes wines. “There's a sweet spot right around 13.9 percent alcohol, and another right around 14.2,” he told the group.

What is a typical Rutherford cabernet sauvignon? In general terms, an on-target Rutherford cabernet (such as Niebaum-Coppola, Frog's Leap, Sequoia Grove or Freemark Abbey Bosché) is at once sumptuous and delineated, marginally more fulsome than cabernets from Oakville south, and sleeker than those from the northern valley. I look for a focused yet generous perfume of ripe fruit and earth, echoed on the palate by rich flavors and supple tannins with a gleam of pure fruit at the heart. It's a wonderfully concentrated and full-bodied red, and at the same time lucid and crisp—that is, fleshy enough to qualify as voluptuous, but not the kind of dense, heavy fruit-bomb wine that can be made from very ripe grapes grown just about anywhere.

Every growing season tells a tale; the main plot points being significant weather events. The story of 2002, the Rutherford vintage in current release, is actually kind of boring. But uneventful vintages often become classics, and this may prove to be a case in point.

The '02 growing season began with unsettled spring weather that interfered with pollination just enough to reduce the potential crop naturally. From there, it was everything in moderation, even a pair of brief, late-summer heat spikes that gently accelerated the ripening curve. No news was good news: The grapes simply ripened—which means, paradoxically, that they didn't ripen simply. The sweet heat at the valley's semi-flexed elbow was relieved every few days by pulses of cool marine air that tempered the sun's fire to a steady glow, taken up at night by the gravelly soil that radiated the day's heat back to the vines. In each separate plot a decision was made at some point, ostensibly the propitious moment for perfect ripeness, and the grapes were harvested and sent off to a winery for sublimation into wine. *Voilà, c'est ça.*

The 2002 Rutherford cabernets, as a group, are the most impressive viticultural statement by a California AVA to date. They're what I think

of as “Endless Summer” wines (evoking the idyllic feeling captured on the two surfing films under that title made by Bruce Brown), reflecting all the qualities of a summer that's as pleasant for people as for vines—days that are nice and hot without being infernal, with heat lingering into the evening before being kissed away by cool marine air that laps over into morning and burns off easily well before noon. The best of these wines, such as Niebaum-Coppola, Quintessa, Sequoia Grove, Tres Sabores and Staglin (among quite a few others) show the definition and structure of a cooler year such as '98 but without the tendency toward greenness. There's also a certain juicy ripeness. That's a prized quality normally obtained in a season with consistent warmth and without the kind of extended blazing heat that makes wines coarse by cooking out the subtler aromas and flavors, lowering natural acidity and thickening the skins with heavy tannin. I've always thought that the great old Rutherford cabernets made in the 1940s and '50s by Inglenook and Beaulieu had a certain tenderness at their hearts. I found a similar quality in many of the '02s I tasted from barrel, and it's still there in many of the bottled wines.

As a bonus, such pretty fruit apparently encouraged even the most lumber-mad winemakers to go a little lighter on the new oak. There's plenty of wood on these wines, all right—Rutherford is in California, after all—but nothing like the cruel excesses of the late '90s. The wines are seasoned with oak, as they should be, rather than overtly flavored. It's too soon to declare that a trend. There was a lot of backsliding in '03, but that was a difficult vintage. Barrel samples of '04s have been remarkably shy of gratuitous oak, and if '05 is the beauty everyone expects (as I write this, the harvest has just begun under near-perfect conditions), then that forbearance (a sign of winemaking maturity, I believe) may well continue.

In other words, Rutherford cabernets will almost certainly become more collectible as time goes on. Unfortunately, the ranks of cabernet collectors include a disproportionate number of the wine world's equivalent of fashion victims. In blindly stocking their cellars with obscenely expensive bottles filled with mediocre or even downright bad wine, they're like the gullible socialite who shows up at the ballet's opening-night gala wearing a one-off designer gown that looks awfully like a chicken costume.

Don't be that guy. If you want to buy some cabernet that you can either drink or sell ten years from now, and especially if you would rather drink it than sell it, look to Rutherford. ■