

NAPA 2016 VINTAGE: 5 CONSECUTIVE YEARS OF FANTASTIC WINES

Friday, May 3, 2019

At first, I wasn't really blown away by the 2016 vintage in Napa Valley, even though everyone else has been. Maybe I got put off by all the hype from winemakers. Perhaps it was because I was already impressed by the excellent quality of the 2015 vintage despite the hot growing season and short crop. Plus, if it were true, 2016 would be the fifth consecutive outstanding vintage for Napa and Northern California at large.

However, after tasting more than 1,000 wines from 2016 last year with my son Jack and senior editor Nick Stock and more recently in [February](#) and [March](#), I am now convinced: the 2016 vintage in Napa and Sonoma Valley is exceptional.

The 2016 bottles, particularly in Napa, Carneros, Sonoma Coast and Knights Valley, show beautiful transparency and freshness, regardless of color or grape type. Their sense of place as well as vintage is what great wine is all about. The best have a classicism that highlights their firmness of tannins, brightness of acidity and clarity of fruit that all wine lovers appreciate.

“With the 2016 vintage you can really understand the vineyards and the areas,” says Philippe Melka, a winemaker who consults for numerous top wineries from [Dana Estate](#) to [Brand](#) as well as his own label. “This is what is so exciting about the vintage.”

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I share Melka's views and others with the same opinion. Of course, we tasted a number of other vintages including 2015 and some 2017s, but it's this sense of place in so many of the 2016s that is so exciting. For example, the [Howell Mountain](#) reds have a solid, stoic character you would expect.



Rutherford has the dusty, polished tannins with ripe and juicy fruit. [St. Helena](#) has the solid, chewy, and tannic structure. [Pritchard Hill](#) reds have a perfumed and fresh character with firm tannins through the center palate.

“It's like tasting different vineyards in Burgundy,” says Chris Cooney, winemaker of [Dana Estate](#) who has a number of vineyard designated wines in key areas such as Howell Mountain and Rutherford. “But you had to be careful and make the right decision on when to harvest.”



The 100-point Grace Family Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2016.

2016 Napa Valley perfect wines

I rated one of Cooney's wines a perfect 100 points: the [Dana Estates Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Howell Mountain Hershey Vineyard 2016](#). Other perfect wines with 100-point scores include [Abreu Napa Valley Madrona Ranch 2016](#), [Bond Napa Valley Quella 2016](#), [Colgin Cellars Napa Valley IX Estate 2016](#), [Continuum Estate 2016](#), [Grace Family Vineyards 2016](#), [Harlan Estate Napa Valley 2016](#),

[Schrader Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard Old Sparky 2016](#), and [Screaming Eagle Napa Valley 2016](#).

Not all 2016s are perfect wines or have the transparency that the best wines of the vintage have. Some winemakers obviously picked too late and lost some of the true personality of their wines, trading ripe or overripe character for the genuine nature of the vintage.

“You could achieve any style you wanted in 2016; so some people may have picked a little late,” says Jason Exposto, winemaker of [Futo Vineyards](#), which produced some gorgeous and nuanced wines. “The great wines separate themselves for their buoyancy with the power.”

Indeed, what was so surprising about most of the top reds we tasted from the 2016 vintage was that so many were medium to full bodied. Heavy, blockbuster reds were not what the best wines of the vintages were about.

This continues the suggestion that the best of California, particularly Napa Valley, are more about subtlety and purity than power and alcohol. They show an agility and lightness that has not been seen for a long time.

“You are going to see a run of vintages of medium to full bodied,” says Thomas Brown, one of Napa's leading winemakers who oversees production of some top names such as [Schrader](#).

“It is mother nature taking the lead on this. But people are pulling back as well. There are still people making full throttle wines but vintages like 2016 and 2018 were not conducive to that. There is a return to site transparency in 2016,” adds Thomas.

A large part of the greatness of the 2016 vintage is due to the balanced growing season. The lack of real heat spikes in the summer meant vines were not stressed. But it's also about winemaking skill.

2018 Napa even better?

I have not tasted many 2018s, but winemakers speak highly of the quality of what they have in their cellars. Most agree that 2018 should be even better than the already wonderful 2016 and are making wines are in the same style of transparency, purity and freshness. I can't wait to taste them.

“It is a pleasure to make the blend in 2018 as it was not too marked by the vintage,” says Helene Mingot, winemaker at [Eisele Vineyard](#). “We see the true character of our vineyards.”

Anne Colgin of [Colgin Vineyards](#) enthusiastically adds: “We had such a great run of vintages recently and the 2016s are the complete package with captivating notes with freshness and richness, and the power without the weight. It's an elusive thing. I am really drawn to it. I don't think it gets much better than this. But we will see. Wait until the 2018.”

It is decisions like this that underline how the best winemakers in the regions are dedicated to making wines of epic quality. And they have to, considering the stellar prices for the best wines of Napa. Sonoma prices for the most part are much more reasonable but many producers have the same dedication to quality. Bring on the great wines! — *James Suckling, Editor & CEO*

CONTINUUM NAPA VALLEY SAGE MOUNTAIN VINEYARD 2016



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Country	United States
Region	California
Vintage	2016

Score
100

Super aromas of blackberries, blackcurrants and blueberries. Hints of fresh herbs and tobacco. Iron and ink. Full-bodied, very tight and powerful, yet not too heavy. Lightly chewy and polished. So much nerve and intensity. Super length and depth. Drink after 2025, but a joy to taste now.