



The Historical Tasting of Joseph Phelps Vineyards Insignia (1974 - 2012)

November 7, 2013

For my comments on the significance of this event, you can access a 5 minute, 17 second video of this **historical tasting** here.

Tasting Notes

1974 Joseph Phelps Insignia 99

I remember this vintage well as it was one of *The Wine Advocate's* earliest, highly recommended wines. It was also a game-changer, although that was not recognized by anyone (including me) at the time. This was the first of the Bordeaux blend wines that later became known as Meritage wines, although I disliked that name so much I refused to use it, calling the wines Proprietary Red Blends instead. The 1974 Insignia was bottled in January, 1977; case production was 670 cases; and the alcohol was 13.8%. It was fashioned from 94% Cabernet Sauvignon from the Steltzer Vineyard in Stags Leap and 6% Merlot from Stanton Vineyard. None of it came from estate fruit. The wine was aged 11 months in American and French oak. My early notes stated that the wine was sumptuous, very rich and incredibly impressive, but needed to be drunk within its first decade of life. Well, in September, 2013, approaching 40 years of age, it is even better than it was 36 years ago. So much for crystal balling the potential of these wines. Of course, 1974 was an unusually warm year with a fabulous Indian Summer, and the results were very ripe, concentrated Cabernet Sauvignons that a few critics thought were over-the-top and too rich. How often we hear those same complaints, with the same phony indignation, today. When tasted in September, 2013, the 1974 Insignia exhibited a dark garnet color as well as an incredible, sweet, Pauillac-like nose of Christmas fruitcake, cedarwood, rich plum and red and black fruits, and a hint of underbrush. It possesses a noble freshness and sweetness and the fruit is holding beautifully. Never in my wildest imagination could I have believed this 1974 would perform at a nearly perfect level nearly 40 years after it was made. This profound wine makes a mockery of one of the biggest sham arguments in the wine world put forth by critics who say California wines don't age.

1975 Joseph Phelps Insignia 92

With a tiny production of 480 cases (13.3% alcohol), 1975 is the outringer among all of the Insignias to date. A blend of 86% Merlot from the Stanton Vineyard and 14% Cabernet Sauvignon from growers in Yountville, Oakville and St. Helena, it was aged for 12 months in French and American oak. I was never too high on this wine early on, but it has matured nicely. This was a cold growing season with rain in early September. The harvest continued into November for many vineyards (which sounds like 2011). However, the quality has turned out to be quite high with wines of longevity as well as an unusual elegance and finesse for Napa Valley. This refined wine offers up notes of forest floor as well as streaks of vegetative matter. Medium-bodied and spicy, the wine is dominated by roasted coffee, cedarwood, damp earth and forest floor characteristics. The fruit profile is along the red fruit spectrum rather than the darker blue and black fruits that were present in the 1974. The wine is very fresh, revealing adequate acidity, and largely resolved tannins, but it is sitting on the edge of an abyss, although it is still very much intact. While it remains outstanding and enjoyable, I wouldn't push my luck much further with this vintage.

1976 Joseph Phelps Insignia 96

The 1976 Insignia was nearly perfect when I initially tasted it. An incredible drought in the summer months made 1976 one of the driest years on record, resulting in a tiny crop of thick-skinned, tannic berries with very little juice-to-skin ratio. This was the first vintages in which Joseph Phelps decided to utilize what is one of the great first-growth sites of Napa Valley, the Eisele Vineyard. The final blend was 94% Cabernet Sauvignon from Calistoga's Eisele Vineyard (now owned by the Bordelais, in particular

Château Latour) and 6% Merlot from the Stanton Vineyard. The alcohols were 13.8% and 785 cases were produced. The 1976 also enjoyed a longer barrel aging of 15 months in a combination of American and French oak. A big, rich red, it offers a dense garnet color along with notes of unsmoked cigar tobacco and Asian spices, a full-bodied, deep, concentrated, broad, savory mouthfeel, plenty of sweet red and black fruits, ripe tannin and remarkable freshness as well as delineation. This gorgeous, complex, classic Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon is fully mature, and probably should be consumed over the next 4-5 years.

1977 Joseph Phelps Insignia 94

Interestingly, 1977 was the first vintage to move completely to French oak. Additionally, 20% of the fruit came from estate vineyards with 80% from growers. Made from an unusual blend of 50% Cabernet Sauvignon, 30% Merlot and 20% Cabernet Franc from the Tench Vineyard (next to Backus on the Oakville hillsides), Stanton Vineyard in Oakville, and the Spring Valley Vineyard in St. Helena. Production was the *highest yet at 1,900 cases*, and the alcohol achieved 13.3%. This was the second drought year in a row, which generally resulted in a much smaller than normal crop size, but most growers thought the grapes came in less stressed and in better overall health than what they saw in 1976. The 1977 Insignia exhibits wonderful sweet plum, red and black currant, fruitcake and spice box notes, a surprisingly broad, savory, sweet mouthfeel, and comes across better than I remember. It is a complex wine aromatically, and its medium to full-bodied flavors seem to be intact. Readers who love notions of baking spices, allspice, fruitcake, etc. will like the complexity offered by this wine.

1978 Joseph Phelps Insignia 95

In 1978, heavy rains finally returned to Napa Valley, replenishing drought-stricken soils and helping to fill the reservoirs. The summer growing season was relatively warm with some heat spikes during the last two weeks of September, which forced growers to harvest earlier than expected. The 1978's final blend was 50% Cabernet Sauvignon, 30% Merlot and 20% Cabernet Franc, with 32% from estate vineyards and 68% from growers. Fifty-five percent of the fruit came from Oakville vineyards, 20% from the Spring Valley Vineyard in St. Helena, 13% from the Eisele Vineyard and 12% from their new Backus Vineyard in Oakville. Total production was 1,200 cases, and the natural alcohol came in at 13.5%. The wine's time in barrel was extended dramatically to 24 months in French oak. The fabulous 1978 appears to be even stronger than I remember. A dense plum/garnet color is accompanied by an exceptional bouquet of espresso beans, sweet red and black currants, licorice, lead pencil shavings and cedar. Deep, ripe, full-bodied and opulent with oodles of fruit and glycerin, this beauty is fresh and lively. Although fully mature, it appears capable of lasting another decade or more.

1979 Joseph Phelps Insignia 90

Much like the issues that plagued the 2011 vintage, the flowering in 1979 was troublesome, resulting in uneven grapes of various sizes and maturity. Rain in September was deleterious, but producers who waited to harvest after the rain ended were rewarded with reasonably good weather. The overall image of this vintage is that it is average to slightly above average. The 1979 Insignia (850 cases produced and 13.8% alcohol) is composed of 70% Cabernet Sauvignon and 30% Merlot, with 35% coming from the Eisele Vineyard, 35% from the Backus Vineyard and 30% from the Stanton Vineyard. The wine was aged 18 months in French oak. All of this shows the incredible flexibility that the winemaking staff at Joseph Phelps consistently exhibited in putting together their flagship wine. The dark garnet/ruby-colored 1979 reveals wonderful notes of sweet currants, walnuts, black currants, cedar and graphite. This elegant, medium-bodied, surprisingly deep and flavorful wine seems fully mature, but is in no danger of falling apart. It displays hints of tobacco leaf and herbs. The overall impression is one of ripe fruit, a measured elegance, and impressive purity.

1980 Joseph Phelps Insignia 89

A cool early growing season followed by an unusually cool summer was broken by heat spikes in late September that pushed sugars much higher, causing some producers to panic and harvest immediately. Overall, this is considered to be an average vintage for Bordeaux varietals in Napa Valley. The 1980 Insignia is the first year where production exceeded 2,000 cases (2,450 cases produced), and the alcohol came in at 13.8%. It is a blend of 85% Cabernet Sauvignon and 15% Merlot. Going against the trend at

that time, 93% of the grapes came from growers and only 7% from their estate holdings, including the Spring Valley Vineyard in St. Helena, the Harris Vineyard in Yountville, the Beckstoffer vineyards in both Oakville and Rutherford, the Eisele Vineyard in Calistoga (29%), and the biggest component part from the Reese Vineyard in Yountville, which accounted for 45% of the total. The 1980 was aged 15 months in French oak. The still youthful-looking dark plum/ruby-colored 1980 Insignia exhibits a Provençal, peppery, *garrigue* note intermixed with a hint of Asian soy, good fruit on the attack and medium body. This wine will certainly hold for 5-10 years, but I do not believe more complexity or additional pleasure will emerge from this wine. It's interesting that this is the first of four straight vintages that were somewhat off-form for this cuvée.

1981 Joseph Phelps Insignia 88

This vintage had one of the earliest harvests in Napa Valley history because of very hot temperatures during the summer. The crop was extremely small because of drought and heat during the growing season, and most observers thought it was going to be a rich, forward, sexy vintage. However, most of the wines did not live up to those expectations, and were good rather than inspirational. The 1981 Insignia is a blend of 60% Cabernet Sauvignon, 28% Merlot and 12% Cabernet Franc, with 73% from growers and the rest from estate vineyards. The alcohol came in at 13%, and the wine spent 16 months in French oak. Fully mature with notes of sweet black tea, cinnamon, allspice and a candied cherry/currant component, this soft, attractive, spicy wine falls off slightly on the palate. There is a disconnect between the complex aromatics and the moderately endowed palate. Drink the 1981 over the next 5-6 years.

1982 Joseph Phelps Insignia 86

1982, one of the famous *El Nino* years, experienced wet conditions during winter and spring, followed by a cool growing season. To complicate things even further, it rained during the harvest. This was never considered to be a high quality vintage, and for the most part, the wines have largely faded into oblivion. The 1982 Insignia (2,980 cases produced) tips the scales at 13.4% alcohol. It was made from one of their more unusual blends of 50% Cabernet Sauvignon and the highest ever percentage of Cabernet Franc, 30%, as well as 20% Merlot. Thirty-eight percent of the fruit came from estate vineyards and the rest from growers, including Spring Valley Vineyard in St. Helena, Stanton and Tench vineyards in Oakville, Markham Vineyard in Yountville, the Beckstoffer vineyards in Oakville and Rutherford, and Backus Vineyard in Oakville. The 1982 spent 15 months in oak barrels prior to bottling. It exhibits a medium to dark plum/garnet color, along with a spicy, spearminty, earthy set of aromatics that are sweet and attractive, but very mature. The wine is elegant and lighter-weight than most Insignia's with attractive sassafras and red and black plum and currant fruit. This interesting, good, fully mature wine should be drunk over the next 3-4 years.

1983 Joseph Phelps Insignia 85?

Another challenging vintage in Napa Valley (the fourth year in a row with unusual conditions), 1983 was characterized by wet weather in March and April, again in August, and during the beginning of the harvest in September. There are just over 3,000 cases of the 1983 Insignia, a blend of 60% Cabernet Sauvignon, 20% Merlot and 20% Cabernet Franc from the same vineyards as the 1982. It achieved 13.6% alcohol. Muted and monolithic, it displays a dark plum/garnet color, a touch of reduction, mulberry, dusty, loamy soil, tobacco leaf, sweet cherry and dark currant notes, and a clipped finish. While capable of lasting another 5-6 years, it is best drunk up. Do not expect anything compelling.

1984 Joseph Phelps Insignia 94

This year enjoyed a more normal Napa spring weather-wise, with warm temperatures interspersed with hot periods throughout the summer, and an early harvest. The 1984 Insignia is a blend of 60% Cabernet Sauvignon, 30% Merlot and 10% Cabernet Franc (30% of the fruit from estate vineyards and 70% from growers), and for the first time in a number of years the barrel regime was shortened to 11 months. The wine's strikingly dark ruby/plum/purple color belies its nearly 30 years of age. Abundant red and black currant fruit notes intermixed with notions of incense, truffles, underbrush and forest floor emerge from this full-bodied, dense, rich Insignia. It still appears capable of further nuances and development, which is

hard to believe given its age. An impressive underlying vibrancy and focus are found in this still young Napa red.

1985 Joseph Phelps Insignia 95

1985 is often considered to be one of the great Napa Valley vintages. It began with an early flowering, and the almost perfect weather conditions allowed the grapes to ripen slowly. The lack of heat spikes meant that producers could wait for the ideal moment to harvest. 1985 was the first vintage in which I gave a three-digit score to a Napa Cabernet Sauvignon (the Groth Reserve made by Nils Venge), but I have always thought that this vintage never lived up to its potential. That said, the 1985 Insignia was stunning. The case production reached an all-time high (for that era) of 4,700 cases, and the natural alcohol came in at 13.5%. It is composed of 60% Cabernet Sauvignon, 25% Merlot and 15% Cabernet Franc with 25% from estate fruit and the balance from growers. The 1985 spent 13 months in French oak. Fresh, lively notes of spice box, roasted herbs, black currants and plums are followed by a dark, broodingly backward wine with impressive richness, full body and a long finish displaying light to moderate tannins. The acidity is more vibrant and noticeable than in other vintages, but the wine has more than sufficient lushness and extravagance of fruit and glycerin to balance out the structural components. This beauty should continue to drink well for another 15-20+ years.

1986 Joseph Phelps Insignia 94

Another strong performance by an Insignia from the mid-eighties, this 4,000-case blend follows nearly the same formula as the 1984 and 1985 (23% from estate fruit and the rest from growers). The final blend was 60% Cabernet Sauvignon, 30% Merlot and 10% Cabernet Franc. This surprisingly rich, dark garnet-colored Insignia displays notes of cedarwood, tobacco leaf, black currants, graphite and damp earth. Medium to full-bodied with remarkable density, richness and vigor for its age, one would think that with this much Merlot in the blend it would be near the end of its life, but that's not the case. It appears to have reached its plateau of full maturity, but it should drink well for another decade or more.

1987 Joseph Phelps Insignia 86

I remember liking the 1987 more early in its life than I did at this vertical tasting. Only 2,500 cases were produced. The wine finished with 13.1% alcohol, and the blend was 70% Cabernet Sauvignon, a whopping 20% Cabernet Franc and 10% Merlot. For the first time, the production was split evenly between estate and growers fruit. It was a relatively warm growing season with an early harvest, but low yields. In 1987, Phelps had their lowest Cabernet Sauvignon production since 1976, and virtually the entire Napa Cabernet crop was in the cellars by the end of September. At this tasting, the 1987 revealed a dark amber color, a saline/Chinese black tea character, and hit the palate with some dusty tannins, earth, cedar wood and spice characteristics. The wine never fully expanded or opened up. It is certainly well-made and pure, but it seems angular, austere and lacking the charm, flesh and concentration of the finest vintages.

1988 Joseph Phelps Insignia 89

1988 experienced a weird growing season with an early bud break, followed by a freakish hailstorm that reduced yields by 20% in certain sectors of Napa Valley. The vintners were happy with the flavor profile of the 1988, a blend of 50% Cabernet Sauvignon, 30% Merlot and 20% Cabernet Franc. It spent 16 months in French oak and has a finished alcohol of 13%. Production was tiny at 2,170 cases. The 1988 still exhibits a dark ruby/garnet color, and is medium to full-bodied although slightly monolithic by the standards of the finest Insignia vintages. It possesses notes of roasted herbs, lavender, red and black currants as well as hints of wood spice and smoke. Although not a great wine, it is better than I recall, and appears to have reached full maturity. It should last for another decade.

1989 Joseph Phelps Insignia 91

1989 was the first year in which over 75% of the blend came from estate vineyards, in this case from their Banca Dorada Vineyard in Rutherford (the balance came from an Oakville grower). Luckily, Phelps had harvested a considerable amount of fruit from this site before an unusual amount of rain (5 inches) fell during the third week of September. Production was 4,500 cases, the alcohol level was 13%, and a higher percentage than usual of Cabernet Sauvignon was used in the blend. The 1989 reveals sweet

Christmas fruitcake, black currant, licorice, damp earth and forest floor notes in its well-built, medium-bodied, elegant personality. With excellent color as well as fruit concentration, this is another vintage that has aged better than I would have expected. It should keep for 5-10 more years.

1990 Joseph Phelps Insignia 91

A wet spring and troublesome flowering, followed by a beautifully warm summer with an absence of prolonged heat spikes resulted in high quality grapes and an early harvest that was largely completed by the end of September. This blend of 78% estate fruit (primarily from the Banca Dorada and Las Rocas vineyards) and 22% from growers finished at 13% alcohol. The final blend of 80% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Merlot and 10% Cabernet Franc followed the formula from 1989. Time in barrel was also lengthened to 23 months in new and used French oak. There were 5,725 cases produced. The 1990 Insignia still possesses a healthy dark ruby/purple-tinged color that is just beginning to lighten at the edge. Lots of licorice, black currant, Chinese black tea, cedarwood and spice jump from the glass of this wine. It possesses lovely fruit, medium body and an elegant, pure, expressive mid-palate as well as finish. While fully mature, it should continue to drink well for 10-15 years.

1991 Joseph Phelps Insignia 100

This has always been a famous vintage in Napa Valley, particularly for Cabernet Sauvignon. The wet spring, which broke a 5-year drought, was followed by an unusually cool, but dry growing season. Warm weather began in late September and continued into a beautiful Indian summer in October, which allowed patient producers to wait for sugar levels to raise and flavors to fully develop. As a result, many profound Napa Cabernets that have stood the test of time were produced in 1991. The final blend for the 1991 Insignia was 80% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Merlot and 10% Cabernet Franc, with 89% of the fruit from the Banca Dorada and Los Rocas vineyards, and 11% from growers. Production was 6,000 cases and the wine came in at 13.5% alcohol. An extraordinary dense plum/purple color is followed by a seductive as well as explosive bouquet of white chocolate, *crème de cassis*, spring flowers, licorice and a touch of graphite. This full-bodied, opulent 1991 reveals a flawless integration of acidity, tannin, wood and alcohol. Magnificent in the mouth with an opulent and voluptuous texture, and not a hard edge to be found, it reveals mindboggling purity and vigor. This sensational Insignia can be enjoyed over the next 10-15+ years.

1992 Joseph Phelps Insignia 95

A dream vintage for growers, 1992 enjoyed an early bud break, large and even flowering, warm weather during the summer and a super-abundant, perfectly mature crop. In fact, in some cases there was too much wine. There were a whopping 9,500 cases of the beautiful 1992 Insignia, a blend of 67% Cabernet Sauvignon and 33% Merlot (82% came from estate vineyards). This wine, which achieved 13.5% alcohol, has still not reached full maturity. It is one of those magical Napa wines that has been drinkable since its release and has never closed down. An attractive dark plum/purple color is followed by sweet aromas of *crème de cassis*, spring flowers and a touch of background oak. This opulent, full-bodied, sexy, full-throttle Insignia is drinking beautifully. As the wine sits in the glass, mature aromas of black tea and charcuterie begin to emerge. It should continue to age effortlessly for 10-15+ years.

1993 Joseph Phelps Insignia 90

This was a complicated year weather-wise, with rain during the flowering, which lowered the crop size, and an unusual and irregular growing season with serious heat spikes in both August and September. Careful monitoring and selective harvesting was required. The 1993 Insignia (a 5,480-case blend of 88% Cabernet Sauvignon and 12% Merlot; 13.5% alcohol) was the first vintage to be aged 26 months in 100% new French oak. Although much lighter than the two top vintages of 1991 and 1992, it is a medium-bodied, soft, fully mature red exhibiting notes of Asian spices, licorice, red and black currants, and forest floor, and sweet tannin in the finish. While not likely to improve, it is capable of holding for another 5-10 years.

1994 Joseph Phelps Insignia 98

The 1994 vintage has long been considered to be one of Napa Valley's finest years over the last three decades. A bone-chilling spring, a cooler than normal early summer, and a gentle, increasingly warm

August through early October resulted in small berries that resulted in concentrated, pure wines. There were 8,000 cases of the 1994 Insignia made from a blend of 88% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Merlot and 2% Cabernet Franc (69% from estate vineyards and 31% from growers). Still in its adolescence, the remarkable Insignia is one of many stunning Cabernet Sauvignon-based wines produced in Napa in 1994. It boasts an inky/purple color along with a glorious nose of black raspberries, blackberries and black currants that is still somewhat primary despite nearly 18 years in bottle. The Phelps team kept this cuvée in 100% new French oak for 28 months. Its magnificent structure, intensity and purity of fruit, ripeness, balance combined with authoritative power and the magnetic appeal of this full-bodied, Bordeaux-styled wine are extraordinary. This amazing effort is just coming into its best years, and should drink well for at least another 15-20 years.

1995 Joseph Phelps Insignia 98

This began as a potentially troublesome year. The early spring was very wet, and unusually cool weather plagued both June and July, two important months in the growing season. Warm weather finally arrived in August (much later than usual), and stayed through the end of October, producing a glorious Indian Summer that allowed growers to delay the harvest. The results are wines that have gotten stronger and stronger in bottle. They easily rival the 1994s, but the 1995s are more streamlined. Phelps produced 10,000 cases of the 1995 Insignia, a blend of 90% Cabernet Sauvignon, 7% Merlot and 3% Petit Verdot that achieved 13.5% alcohol. Three-quarters of the fruit came from estate vineyards and the rest from growers. It spent 26 months in new French oak. A wine of great intensity and richness, it displays classic notes of licorice, barbecue smoke, *crème de cassis*, cedarwood and forest floor. Full-bodied with sensational purity, a multidimensional mouthfeel and a long, voluptuous finish with no hard edges, it has only reached mid-adolescence, and has at least two decades of life ahead of it.

1996 Joseph Phelps Insignia 95

The third consecutive brilliant effort from Joseph Phelps, the 1996 Insignia was produced from a weird growing season. A freakish rainstorm in mid-May (very atypical for Napa Valley) damaged the delicate flowers, thus reducing crop yields. Heat spikes occurred in July, and many vineyards were stressed by the high temperatures as well as drought-like conditions. Fortunately, September was mild and dry overall, and October was normal with Indian Summer lasting until early November. This big, muscular 1996 does not possess the charm and finesse of the 1994 and 1995. Aged 22 months in 100% new French oak, this blend of 83% Cabernet Sauvignon and 17% Merlot reveals a powerful core of red and black fruits, dusty, loamy soil, lavender and a hint of toast. I would not describe it as elegant, but rather, it is a big, backstrapping, Cabernet Sauvignon-based wine that should continue to drink well for 15 or more years.

1997 Joseph Phelps Insignia 100

An ideal warm, dry spring, June and July was followed by a surprisingly cool August that slowed down what looked to be rapid sugar accumulation in the grapes. September's temperatures were average to above average, without any potentially damaging heat spikes. This allowed the harvest to unfurl slowly, with no stress or imminent danger. For many Napa Cabernet Sauvignons, this resulted in one of the top vintages of the nineties. Consumers, observers and wine critics will undoubtedly argue for decades over which vintage of the nineties turned out to be the finest – 1991, 1992, 1994, 1995 or 1997. The 1997 Insignia is a 20,000-case blend of 83% Cabernet Sauvignon, 14% Merlot and 3% Petit Verdot, with 60% coming from estate vineyards and 40% from growers. The alcohol came in at 13.8%. An inky/plum/purple color is accompanied by a stunning bouquet of violets, charcoal, *crème de cassis* and a hint of toast. Prodigious when it hits the palate with a full-bodied expansiveness, there is not a hard edge to be found in the 1997, only velvety tannins, compelling depth and fruit intensity, and stunning purity. It is a perfect expression of Napa viticulture and wine that should continue to age effortlessly for two decades or more.

1998 Joseph Phelps Insignia 92

The *El Niño* weather pattern in 1998 brought abundant rain to Napa Valley in the spring and later in the summer. Grape clusters were characterized by irregular ripening and different-sized berries, then the threat of raisining when heat spikes occurred. The nightmare growing season required diligent and frequent vineyard work. Getting cooler and mountainside vineyard sites fully mature was difficult, if not

impossible. The more precocious vineyards began harvesting at the end of September and continued through early November (which did not happen again until 2011). Joseph Phelps produced 14,000 cases of the 1998 Insignia, a blend of 78% Cabernet Sauvignon and 22% Merlot (80% from estate vineyards and 20% from growers). The alcohol came in at 14%. The 1998 displays a dark garnet color as well as notes of leafy tobacco, underbrush, black cherries and black currants. An elegant, mid-weight Insignia with sweet fruit, ripe tannin and interesting cedar, licorice and spice characteristics, it is fully mature and is unlikely to get any better. Enjoy it over the next 7-8 years.

1999 Joseph Phelps Insignia 91

I was in the minority thinking the 1999 vintage was good rather than special. The weather consisted of a mild summer, with a serious heat spike in July, and a relatively long hang-time that resulted in grapes with high acids as well as powerful tannins. The latter two issues have always concerned me, making me wonder if the fruit would crack and fade away before the tannins melted. A blend of 71% Cabernet Sauvignon, 21% Merlot and the rest Petit Verdot, Malbec and Cabernet Franc (79% from estate vineyards and 21% from growers), 15,000 cases were produced and the alcohol reached 14%. The 1999 possesses a healthy deep ruby/purple color along with an open-knit, sweet, candied nose of red and black currants, loamy soil, underbrush and forest floor as well as a touch of oak. This medium-bodied, fresh, lively Insignia exhibits tell-tale acids with much of its tannin already resolved. It is an outstanding Insignia, but not one of the estate's legendary efforts. It should keep for ten more years.

2000 Joseph Phelps Insignia 90

2000 was an unusual year as it was cool, but at the time, it was not believed to be that much of a challenge in waiting for maturity to come. However, the lower-than-average temperatures continued through much of the summer, with typical weather not returning until September, which was too late to help many producers, especially those with higher mountain vineyards. This vintage is satisfying, but rarely stunning. The 2000 Insignia, a 15,000-case blend of 77% Cabernet Sauvignon, 18% Merlot and the rest Petit Verdot, Malbec and Cabernet Franc, came in at 13.9% alcohol. It is a mid-weight, elegant effort with lots of black currant, violet, earth and forest floor characteristics. Medium-bodied with excellent ripeness and sweet tannins, it is one of the more successful wines I have tasted from this vintage. The wine is close to full maturity and should keep for another 10-12 years.

2001 Joseph Phelps Insignia 98+

A whopping 18,000 cases were made of this great vintage of Insignia, a blend of 89% Cabernet Sauvignon, 8% Petit Verdot and 3% Malbec (the first vintage of Insignia with no Merlot included). Seventy-three percent came from the estate vineyards and 27% from growers. The 2001 spent 23 months in new French oak, and the alcohol came in at 13%. The year began impressively, with warm weather early-on followed by heat spikes in May that continued off and on through July. Both August and September were cooler than normal, but in early October, Napa Valley experienced temperatures in excess of 100 degrees Fahrenheit for seven straight days. As I have written previously, 2001 has turned out to be a great vintage, and the heat spikes that can be so devastating did not have much of a deleterious effect on the grapes, perhaps because many had already been or were in the process of being harvested. Still a young wine at age 12, the 2001 Insignia exhibits a dense purple color along with a sweet bouquet of camphor, blackberries, *cassis*, incense and spring flowers. Full-bodied, rich and heady with sweet tannin, stunning concentration and a fabulous finish, this remarkable Insignia has 25 or more years of life ahead of it.

2002 Joseph Phelps Insignia 100

One of my all-time favorite vintages for Napa Cabernet Sauvignon, 2002 was warmer overall than 2001, but was cooler in May and throughout the summer. Unusually foggy conditions were apparent in July and August, and by September, when a warming trend began, the weather became remarkably dry and beautiful. That was followed by cool weather in early October, which allowed the grapes to be harvested under textbook conditions. Napa's 2002 Cabernet Sauvignon-based wines tend to be flamboyant, All-American, juicy and extroverted with relatively high alcohols. There are 15,000 cases of the 2002 Insignia, a blend of 78% Cabernet Sauvignon, 14% Merlot, 7% Petit Verdot and 1% Malbec that hit 14.4% alcohol. Eighty-five percent of the fruit came from the estate vineyards and the balance from growers. I

wish I had purchased more of this spectacular wine for my personal collection. It boasts an inky/purple color along with notes of graphite, violets, blackberries, *crème de cassis* and hints of charcoal and barbecue in addition to a full-bodied, multilayered mouthfeel that builds incrementally with great purity, staggering fruit concentration, and a long, velvety, 50+-second finish. This prodigious effort should continue to drink well for 20+ years.

2003 Joseph Phelps Insignia 93

There are 12,000 cases of the 2003 Insignia, a blend of 84% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Petit Verdot, and the rest equal parts Malbec and Merlot (87% of the fruit from estate vineyards). The alcohol level reached 14.4%. I was pleased to see how well this vintage was performing as it has been somewhat forgotten following the compelling years of 2001 and 2002. The spring was cool and the summer was dry and warm until some heat spikes (over 100 degrees Fahrenheit) occurred for four consecutive days in July. Both August and September were warmer and drier than normal with only a few insignificant rain events in September. Most of the Cabernet Sauvignon harvest lasted into late October. The 2003 has performed well in recent tasting, showing a dense purple color along with notes of creosote, lavender, flowers, *crème de cassis*, espresso roast, white chocolate and a hint of oak. Still in a young adolescent stage, it should drink nicely for another 15-20 years.

2004 Joseph Phelps Insignia 98

Most Napa Valley vintners were high on this vintage. The growing season's warm weather in early spring gave the vines a precocious start, and the textbook weather continued into June, July and August. However, by the end of August, a three-week heat wave arrived, with many days exceeding 100 degrees Fahrenheit, which dehydrated the fruit and caused considerable stress in unirrigated vineyards. Most growers felt this long heat wave reduced the crop size by 10-40%. The 2004 Insignia (the first of what became a succession of wines to be made from 100% estate fruit) has one of the highest alcohol percentages, 14.7%, of any Joseph Phelps wine. A 9,000-case blend of 72% Cabernet Sauvignon, 14% Merlot, 12% Petit Verdot and 2% Malbec, it is performing fabulously well at present. This may be a fast-developing vintage as it is already displaying some tertiary nuances. Lots of cedarwood, forest floor, spring flower, black currant and blackberry characteristics intermixed with hints of charcoal and background oak emerge from this full-bodied, glycerin-filled, opulent effort. Aged 24 months in new French oak, this stunning 2004 should continue to drink well for 10-15 more years.

2005 Joseph Phelps Insignia 95+

An extraordinary amount of rain fell between January and June of 2005, causing some flooding in lower areas of Napa Valley. The flowering was enormous and it was clear a potentially huge crop was in store for growers unless crop-thinning was employed. The warm summer, with a few heat spikes in July and August, was followed by a cooling trend that ushered in a perfect Indian Summer that allowed growers to extend their hang-time, and harvest throughout the month of October. Some of the mountain vineyards did not finish picking until mid-November – very late for Napa. The 2005 Insignia, made from 100% estate fruit, is composed of 92% Cabernet Sauvignon, 7% Petit Verdot and 1% Merlot that achieved 14.5% natural alcohol. It was aged 24 months in 100% new French oak. The wine possesses a European-like structure because of the firm tannins and slight austerity, but it exhibits a beautiful density of fruit. Not yet an adolescent, this youthful 2005 reveals an inky/purple color as well as notes of lead pencil shavings, charcoal, black currants, cedar and underbrush. Full and rich, but backward and structured, it needs to be forgotten for another 3-4 years, and drunk over the following 25 years.

2006 Joseph Phelps Insignia 94

This is a 16,900-case blend of 95% Cabernet Sauvignon and 5% Petit Verdot (100% estate fruit) from a vintage that experienced a slowly developing growing season as a result of cool weather and abundant winter rain. The 2006 vintage will be remembered for a huge, 10-day, 100+ degree Fahrenheit heat spike at the end of July, which was unsettling to both growers and vineyards. The 2006 Insignia possesses a deep ruby/purple color as well as copious amounts of *cassis*, but has not yet developed secondary nuances. It remains a big, full-throttle, full-bodied Cabernet Sauvignon-based wine with 14.5% natural alcohol, impressive purity, sweet tannin, decent acidity and a monolithic personality. Everything needed for a graceful evolution is present, and the 2006 should keep for another two decades.

2007 Joseph Phelps Insignia 99

Perhaps I should just go ahead and give this 2007 a three-digit score as it is a profoundly great Cabernet Sauvignon-based effort. The production was 13,500 cases of this 100% estate fruit blend of 88% Cabernet Sauvignon, 8% Merlot and 4% Petit Verdot. The alcohol came in at 14.5%. The growing season was nearly ideal, with early bud break, generous flowering, a bountiful crop size, and summer weather that was warm and dry with no significant heat spikes. According to the Phelps winemaking team, the cluster grape weights in 2007 came in 23-45% lower than average, which surprised everyone. However, the fruit quality was one of the finest they had ever seen. The result is one of the top Insignias yet produced. Aged 24 months in new French oak, this infant 2007 exhibits an inky/purple color along with notes of graphite, spring flowers and smoky oak. This full-bodied, classic Insignia reveals fabulous depth, ripeness, texture, viscosity and richness. Still young and unformed, it should evolve for 25 or more years.

2008 Joseph Phelps Insignia 93

The weather in May was unusually hot, and the grape bunches seemed relatively irregular and loose, with lighter than normal clusters. However, this proved to be an advantage with good air flow promoted by the loose clusters. The summer was warm, but never terribly hot, and the Indian Summer Napa enjoyed allowed for a stress-free harvest. The 2008 (16,650 cases produced), which achieved 14.7% natural alcohol, is composed of 89% Cabernet Sauvignon, 7% Petit Verdot and 4% Merlot, all from estate fruit. It reveals an opaque purple color in addition to blueberry and blackberry fruit notes intermixed with incense and violets. Barely approaching adolescence, it is still a grapy, primary, full-bodied beauty that will benefit from another 4-5 years of cellaring. It should drink well for 20-25 years.

2009 Joseph Phelps Insignia 90

The production of the 2009 Insignia dropped considerably from previous years as only 10,540 cases were produced. All from estate fruit, the final blend was 83% Cabernet Sauvignon, 13% Petit Verdot and 4% Malbec (another year where no Merlot was used). The alcohol came in at 14.5%. The weather was moist and damp in May which also saw some huge heat spikes. Fortunately, June and July cooled down, August was average, and September experienced above average warmth. Statistically, it was over 100 degrees Fahrenheit for 19 days during the growing season, almost all of them occurring in August and September – never a good sign as it tends to stress and/or raisin and burn the grapes, particularly if there has been considerable crop-thinning. A major rain event (over 4 inches) occurred on October 13, so any producer who harvested after that date was negatively affected. This deep ruby/purple-colored offering is an elegant, medium-weight wine with sweet red and black currant fruit, dark cherry, loamy soil and foresty characteristics as well as ripe tannin. This should be an early maturing Insignia that evolves quickly, but positively over the next 10-12 years.

2010 Joseph Phelps Insignia 95

The stunning 2010 Insignia, which is now in bottle, was made from 84% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Petit Verdot and the rest Merlot and Malbec, 11,060 cases were produced, and it achieved 14.9% natural alcohol. All of the fruit came from estate vineyards. A gorgeously intense bouquet of lead pencil shavings, spring flowers, black currants, blackberries, and subtle smoke and foresty aromas jumps from the glass of this full-bodied, rich, concentrated wine with soft tannins, a multidimensional mouthfeel, and a long, rich finish displaying well-integrated acidity, tannin, alcohol and wood. This beauty is one of the top Insignias produced over recent years. It should age easily for 20+ years.

2011 Joseph Phelps Insignia (90-93)

Although it has not yet been bottled, the 2011 Insignia is composed of 82% Cabernet Sauvignon, 11% Petit Verdot and the rest Malbec, Merlot and a dollop of Cabernet Franc, and represents 13,000 cases. It achieved a slightly lower alcohol of 14.1%. Its deep ruby/purple color is followed by sweet aromas of *bouquet garni*, mint, red and black currants, tobacco leaf and licorice, and a surprisingly intense, full-bodied mouthfeel with more richness and intensity than I would have expected from this vintage. It is also precocious and can be drunk upon release or cellared for 15 or more years.

2012 Joseph Phelps Insignia (96-100)

The 2012 Insignia (17,500 cases expected to be produced; 14.5% alcohol) is a blend of 75% Cabernet

Sauvignon, 10% Petit Verdot, 10% Merlot and the rest Malbec and Cabernet Franc. It will be bottled after spending 24 months in new French oak. This looks to be a killer effort, and is probably the greatest Insignia since the 2001 and 2002. An inky/purple color is accompanied by wonderful aromas of smoky black currant and blackberry fruit interwoven with incense, camphor, charcoal and new oak. The wine is deep, multidimensional, full-bodied, rich and opulent with a voluptuous texture. Even as a barrel sample, this stunning effort is irresistible. This deep, prodigious 2012 should be approachable when released and age effortlessly for 25-30 years.

—Robert Parker