

Wednesday Night Wine: Napa Sauvignon Blanc Worth The

Cathy Huyghe, Forbes.com | November 2, 2016

A persistent theme in the Wednesday Night Wine series is the likelihood of consumers to identify a quality difference and express a distinct preference when they're blind to the price. Consumers know what's good, in other words, even when they don't know how much it costs.

We first noticed this tendency during the tasting of a range of Prosecco wines, from entry level all the way to higher-priced DOCG. "We know which wines are better," I wrote then. "We can taste it, and sense it intuitively. And after the retail cost of each of the wines is revealed, most of the tasters agreed that the higher-priced bottles were in fact worth the higher price tag."

At no point in the Wednesday series since then has this theme been as significant — until this week's focus on Napa Sauvignon Blanc. Tasters commented on the wines first without knowing the price, but once we lined up the wines according to preference, the least-preferred wines fell into the less-costly group, and the group of favored wines were clearly those that were higher priced.

We looked closer at the labels at that point and noted that the favored wines also tended to list a specific vineyard of origin on the label, and they tended to be produced in very limited quantities (250 cases a year, as one example).

Price was far from the only differentiating factor, however. Generally speaking, tasters felt that the less favored wines had certain characteristics in common: not enough personality, one-dimensional, and "too citrus-y." The more favored wines, on the other hand, showed "drinkability," a lack of bitterness, and more fruit.

Only a few of the examples we tasted happened to have oak treatment, and it was minimal; that feature, along with the alcohol content, barely factored into the conversation. Tasters placed more emphasis, instead, on whether the wine was approachable, and could easily be passed around the dinner table with a range of food options.

Producers that, in my opinion, consistently distinguish themselves in this category won praise in this group's opinion as well, most notably Arkenstone, Honig, Quintessa, and Round Pond. There were also significantly lesser-known labels that had been, until the tasting, completely off these consumers' radars but that caught their eye and their palates for different reasons. Here were five of those highlights.

2015 Arrow&Branch Sauvignon Blanc, \$35. Tasters appreciated the acidity and fruit in this wine that's identifiable as a Sauvignon Blanc, though raised several notches above. For those reasons — familiarity, but with a boost of quality — tasters said they "couldn't go wrong" by serving it. They noted a confidence about the wine, a unique certainty that "it knows who it is." That was a comment that led to a discussion about the symbiotic nature, and the genetic relationship, of Sauvignon Blanc to Cabernet Sauvignon, the most famous of all Napa plantings.

2013 Empreinte Sauvignon Blanc, \$75. "This wine has so much to give." That was the most resonant comment among tasters, and what they were referring to was its generosity — from the first sniff in the glass all the way to the finish. It managed to be linear in its focus while also blossoming on the palate, and its long finish impressed me so much that I squirreled away the remainder of the wine until the following

day, just to experiment with its longevity. It had somehow wizened over the course of that day, and I enjoyed it even more.

2015 Trefethen Sauvignon Blanc, \$25. Tasters appreciated this wine because it didn't fit their impression of a Sauvignon Blanc profile. That was due in part to winemaking decisions about fermentation and aging, which "rounded out" the wine and made it very approachable. The dark glass bottle of this wine also caught tasters' eye; the dark glass represents an affinity among some winemakers (such as Inglenook's Philippe Bascaules) to protect their wines from light, which they believe can alter their flavor.

2014 Nicholson Jones Sauvignon Blanc, \$32. The only wine in this bunch where "fresh cut grass" (the standard aroma identifier of Sauvignon Blancs from New Zealand) came to tasters' minds. Its fuller body firmly placed this wine as Californian rather than Kiwi, though the additional fruit notes of lemon, melon, and pear supported that profile and bridged the two styles.

2015 Phifer Pavitt Date Night Sauvignon Blanc, \$30. A crowd favorite for its sassy label and fresh, Bordeaux Blanc style, tasters also noted what they called "fun, upbeat" flavors like banana and lemon lime. There was no "spritz" in this wine but the liveliness of it gave tasters the impression that there was and that, one taster said, "just makes me smile."