

The results

While the forward fruit friendliness of this vintage appealed to our judges, the lack of complexity and 'made by the hand, not by the land' quality did not. Christelle Guibert reports on a fascinating tasting

When one of the world's greatest grape varieties from one of the world's great wine regions is put to the test, expectations are naturally high and this 2012 tasting led to a thought-provoking debate.

While the US press praised the 2012s, it was different on this side of the Atlantic. 'There were some lovely wines, but too many tasted the same,' noted Stephen Brook. He feared the style hardened back to the old days of high alcohols and soft textures: 'The wines weren't necessarily overripe or jammy, but they were fruit forward and generous. And sadly the majority were lacking energy, structure, grip and personality.'

Alex Hunt MW took a philosophical view. 'The delight of Cabernet Sauvignon should be one of classicism and symmetry; the sense of something contained, beautifully made, precise and expressive. I ended up with the impression that these 2012s were very much commercially driven and designed for a very specific consumer – one that maybe didn't want those features that make great Cabernet so intellectually and aesthetically interesting. These wines tasted like they were made for drinkers who want something relatively unchallenging: forward, expressive, plush and generous.'

'California wine is booming, but it's not because of Napa Cabernet' Xavier Rousset MS

But Xavier Rousset MS pointed out that all the wines were polished and well made with no faults, 'so you can't complain'. He added: 'They also taste expensive thanks to the smooth texture and oak. The downside is that most of these wines were made in the winery, not in the vineyard. There's no room to go the extra mile and get more complexity because the wines are so worked.'

Brook drew a very interesting parallel with Bordeaux: 'In Bordeaux, you farm your own grapes. In California – and of course there are exceptions – you are mainly contracting to buy grapes, which means you can base your purchases not just on price and location but on the kind of wine you want to make. So, if you have a clear idea of what your consumer is expecting then you can more or less make that almost every year, with some variations, which are dependent on vintage.'

Oakville was the star AVA of this tasting, with

The scores

169 wines tasted
 0 Exceptional
 2 Outstanding
 30 Highly Recommended
 100 Recommended
 31 Commended
 6 Fair
 0 Poor
 0 Faulty

Rutherford and Oak Knoll close behind. Wines from the other AVAs, plus the generic Napa Valley wines, were described as 'very variable'.

With the rise in popularity of Californian wines, it is surprising, even disappointing, to hear those comments, but Rousset had an explanation: 'California wine is booming, but it's not because of Napa Cabernet. It's the new generation of Syrahs and Pinot Noirs, people pushing the boundaries.' Hunt agreed: 'Napa Cab will be the last bastion of the super-ripe school. Everything else will become lighter and fresher and more aromatic.'

'It comes down to money and reputation,' he added. 'It comes down to those Napa vigneronos who are not risk-takers. There are exceptions and there are also some people who have been there a long time who are still willing to make their own style.'

The panel reflected on the elegant, fresher Cal Cabs from the 1960s, 70s and 80s which prove, according to Hunt, that the style can be done. 'This is one wine region that cannot use the excuse of global warming. The Pacific is colder now than it was in the '80s. California isn't facing the same challenges as many classic European regions. The increase in ripeness is purely a human choice, and one which I hope more people will consider reversing in future.'

Entry criteria: producers and UK agents were invited to submit 2012 Californian Cabernets (75% minimum of the variety)

Outstanding 95–97pts



Far Niente, Oakville, Napa Valley

Decanter average score: 96/100pts
 Individual judges' scores: Stephen Brook 96 Alex Hunt MW 96 Xavier Rousset MS 96

ET19.99-£145 *Hatfield Wine Cellars, Harrods, Wineham*

The justly admired Oakville winery has been a Napa Valley fixture since 1979, when it was founded by the late Gil Nickel. From the outset the winemaker has been Dirk Hampson, though today he keeps a knowing eye on the winery's young winemaking team. But his steady presence, as well as that of the Nickel family, has ensured a consistency of style over the decades. Today all wines are estate-grown, and the vineyards are close to Martha's Vineyard and other iconic sites. This wine is aged for 17 months in more than 80% new oak, and is always rich and polished.

Stephen Brook Aromas of oak black fruit and refreshing menthol. Medium-bodied yet intense, with purity of blackcurrant fruit and sleek tannins. Lifting, stylish and complex – great allure, finesse and poise.

Alex Hunt MW Firm, rocky, fresh currant nose – and invigorating style. Very cool and composed on the palate. Refreshingly classical.

Xavier Rousset MS Great tannic structure, with just the right level of acidity for the style. Pure and focused with graphite and blue fruit tones. Very classy.

Drink 2016–2035 Alcohol 14.5%



Gallica, Oakville, Napa Valley 95 SB 95 AH 95 XR 95

£138.99 (2010) *Ministry of Drink*

This small brand was established in 2007 by Rosemary Cakebread, a Napa winemaker with more than 30 years' experience. She became well known for the wines she made at Spotts Woods in St Helena over many years. For Gallica she sources grapes from different parts of California, but the Cabernet is very much rooted in Napa Valley. Her home vineyard consists of just 0.8ha, so it's understandable that this Cabernet is very limited – about 5,000 bottles – and hand-crafted, being aged for 20 months in 80% new oak. Her style has always been a happy marriage between Napa generosity and a Bordeaux-style structure.

SB Reserved blackberry nose, quite oaky. Plump and rounded, fleshy and opulent palate though not extracted, saved from soupiness by firm tannic support. Chewy but not tough with a core of sweet fruit. It's a tad severe now, but it's well made and balanced. Good length.

AH Pretty classic, ripe blackberry aromas. Nicely focused structure, but not ungenerous. Has the balance and cohesion to age well. Fine length and grip, and all in proportion.

XR Well-balanced, well-focused wine wine, with tight tannins and good fruit. It needs time to fully express itself, but is very classy indeed.

Drink 2017–2035 Alcohol 14.5%

The tasters' verdicts

Stephen Brook



Brook has been a contributing editor to Decanters since 1996 and is the Decanter World Wine Awards Regional Chair for USA. The author of more than 30 books, his works include the awarded Wines of California and Finest Wines of California.

Brook's verdict

I expected pure pleasure from this ripe vintage, and in many cases that is what I found. But the vintage also saw a return

to the bad old ways that were temporarily abandoned in 2010 and 2011, when cooler conditions enforced a less sumptuous style than usual. By this I mean that the 2012s can show excessive ripeness and low acidity, leading to soft textures and a lack of structure. That's fine for a fairly basic wine designed for early drinking, but for a \$80 Cabernet it isn't good enough. Soupy wines and flabby textures may delight the partisans of 'long hangtime', but they stifle me as old-fashioned and in sad contrast with the more sprightly and stylish Chardonnays, Pinot Noirs and Syrahs emerging from other Californian regions.

That said, there were some superb wines, especially from Oakville, Rutherford and Mount Veeder. Some estates label their wines simply as Napa Valley rather than under AVAs such as Oakville, but there were some splendid wines in this very large category too. And Napa's cooler areas, such as Oak Knoll and Coombsville, also showed well. There were few wines from outside Napa, and few were distinguished. Paso Robles, as always, offered simple but enjoyable Cabernets at a sensible price.'

Alex Hunt MW



Hunt is purchasing director at Bekkinn Wine Cellars. He became a Master of Wine in 2010, writing his dissertation on ripeness trends in California, and winning the medal for excellence in the tasting exam. He writes a regular column on taste and tasting for JancisRobbins.com, and has judged at the Decanter World Wine Awards for more than a decade.

Hunt's verdict

'This tasting demonstrated the immense affinity between California and Cabernet Sauvignon, and a widespread tendency to sacrifice that particular magic at the altar of generic, expensive-tasting red wine.'

'Too many producers now sidestep Cabernet's singular qualities, making wines verging on overripe, with low refreshment value and dubious ability to age. The precision of aroma and tannin structure that characterise the grape are lost at high ripeness levels, and expression of place is suppressed. The upshot is that we tasted a great many technically competent but rather boring examples. In a region of lesser potential, we might have said "good job", but knowing what California is capable of, one couldn't help wishing for more.'

'Despite this, I am optimistic. There are still beautiful Cabernets made in California. We tasted a good number here. And I suspect the reversion to more classical balance that can be seen in the state's Pinot Noir will eventually take hold in the wider Cabernet community too. Until then, don't overlook Californian Cabernets – but choose carefully.'

Xavier Rousset MS



Rousset became the youngest Master Sommelier in the world in 2002, while working at Brno's Hotel du Vin. Head sommelier at Le Manoir aux Quat' Saisons from 2004, Rousset and head chef Agnès Sverrisson launched Texture in London in 2007, winning a Michelin star in 2010. Their second venture, 28°-52° launched in 2010. Rousset is working on new projects for 2015.

Rousset's verdict

'Most of these wines were well crafted and technically sound, but lacked personality and tasted like they were made to a recipe.'

'On a positive note, I was expecting all the wines to be overly extracted, over-oaked and very high in alcohol. While there were a lot of these, most were not overdone. The alcohol, despite being higher than I would have liked, felt surprisingly well integrated.'

'The Atlas Peak AVA disappointed – the terror showed its limits. I was also underwhelmed by Coombsville. The wines may be better in time, but currently the oak tannins were too hard and dry, and the wines unbalanced with a rustic finish. But Oakville impressed, the wines showing great structure, depth and finesse at an early age.'

'Napa Valley remains a consumer benchmark for its high-quality Cabernet Sauvignon, so it's a shame that in this tasting you could feel the hand of the winemaker dominating the terror, always with the commercial reality in the background.'