

WINE

Rutherford 2007
Cabernet Sauvignon

Reviewed by Gerald Asher

Someone with a sense of irony had decided to hold the first major press tasting of Rutherford's 2007 Cabernet Sauvignons on Bastille Day. And at Rubicon Estate, no less. We sat expectantly at a long table in one of the winery's reception rooms, the first flight of a dozen wines in a semicircle of glasses in front of each of us.

Peter Granoff, wine director of Ferry Plaza Wine Merchants in San Francisco, gave us a brief introduction, telling us to expect the wines to mark a clear shift away from recent excesses in Cabernet Sauvignon, back toward balance and greater finesse. He was joined by Joel Aiken, formerly with Beaulieu Vineyards and now a partner in Meander Cellars, who said "2007 was a year when nature helped us get things right, with ripe tannins, chaste structure, and a good balance of acidity and sugars. We didn't have to interfere with the fruit we were given. All we had to do was insure that a controlled fermentation permitted gentle but perfect extraction of what was there."

Ideal conditions

Aiken's point was well taken. In 2007, conditions in Rutherford, at the heart of Napa Valley, were ideal. Though the preceding winter had been cold, it had been dry, with barely 60 percent of normal rainfall, so the soil warmed up quickly, encouraging an early start to budding and bloom. Any year's crop size is set the year before, but that modest water level seems to have sent a further message to the vines to hold back. Bunches, as they formed, were spare, and berries remained small, so the potential crop was naturally limited from the start. After a mild and uneventful summer, a brief spell of warm temperatures in early September gave the sugars a much-needed boost. Temperatures quickly cooled down

again, and in the second week of October there was just enough rain to insure that the vines, under slight water stress throughout the season, would bring the fruit smoothly to full maturity.

"It's always a plus to have an even growing season and no drama," Kristen Belair Honig, of Honig Vineyards, told me. "The result in 2007 is Cabernet Sauvignon of elegance and refinement."

Certainly, all of the circumstances seemed to be the opposite of those just ten years before, in 1997, when an early harvest of overripe grapes with high sugars had given wines of massive uniformity. It had coincided with the culmination of a trend in growing and winemaking. Enthusiasm for the 2007 vintage confirms that a return to normalcy is well under way.

Cabernet country

Rutherford, at roughly the midway point in Napa Valley, is planted overwhelmingly with Cabernet Sauvignon—3,518 acres (1,424ha) at the last count, compared with 305 acres (123ha) of Sauvignon Blanc, the second-largest grape-variety acreage. Historically, it has been the epicenter of Cabernet Sauvignon production in the valley, with Beaulieu Vineyards and Inglenook (now Rubicon Estate) both established there in the 19th century. Its wines are perhaps less nuanced than those of Stags Leap District, the other Napa Valley AVA of similar renown, but they are more expressive and more muscular. Comparisons between Napa Valley and the Médoc are best avoided (though inevitable, given that both express themselves through the medium of Cabernet Sauvignon), but I sometimes think that Rutherford is to Stags Leap District what Pauillac is to St-Julien. Such comparisons are invidious, of course, and difficult to make in Napa Valley. Some shared characteristics are clear, especially those that mark the wines of Howell Mountain, Spring Mountain, and Mount Veeder. But most other differences among the valley's sectors are difficult to define, because the distinctions imposed by soil, elevation,

and exposure are subtle and highly diverse. The principal cause of diversity and, indeed, of the valley's very existence is the Pacific's Farallon Plate, slowly sliding under the North American continent. The resulting compressions, eruptions, volcanoes, and faults of the past 150 million years or so are the stuff of geology texts, but over those millions of years, the pressure of this great tectonic meshing created California (the North American continent once ended where California now begins) and, with it, Napa Valley—a muddle of decomposed volcanic debris, old ocean crust, sediment from the Central Valley swept westward by the violent convulsion that produced the Sierra Nevada and Franciscan Formation, described by geologists Jonathan Swinchatt and David G Howell in their book *The Winemaker's Dance* as flotsam and jetsam—and the more recent accumulation of alluvium. There's nothing in this valley remotely like the immense beds of limestone or tufa, silex, or Kimmeridgian clay that define European wine regions. Our fascination with Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon starts with its multiple environments.

The Vaca Mountains, abrupt and often cliff-like, enclosing the valley on its east side, are made up of thick layers of rock that overlap each other like roof tiles sloping toward the north. Here and there their severe barrier is broken by canyons, but despite weathered surface decay, the rock is difficult to penetrate, and growers have often had to dynamite their way to planting vines there, especially at the higher elevations. The Mayacamas, on the west side of the valley, are the result of a giant fold. They catch Pacific rainstorms that, over millennia, have carried debris down to the valley where it has formed the gentle slope of alluvial fans that merge and stretch from the base of the mountains on to the valley floor.

The physical composition of fan or vineyard seems to be secondary to its water-holding properties and its particular environment. The Rutherford fan, like others, has particular qualities, and its vineyards,



through their wines, display a range of characteristics that together define the AVA. While most think of Rutherford's key mid-valley position in terms of temperature—not too far up the valley to be too warm, not too near the Bay to be too cool—Andy Beckstoffer attributes the particular pertinence of its relation to Cabernet Sauvignon to the quality of Rutherford light, at a point where the valley is still wide and open before starting to narrow markedly at St Helena. It is light (energy), after all, that is the chief factor of transformation in a vine and of singular importance for Cabernet Sauvignon. (There's an old saying in Bordeaux that the best Médoc vineyards are those that can see the Gironde estuary—that is, those most exposed to its reflected light.)

But whatever their origin, Rutherford's "range of qualities" is sometimes condensed into the expression "Rutherford dust." André Tchelistcheff, for years the iconic winemaker at Beaulieu Vineyards, is said to have applied the expression to Rutherford dirt. But no one is quite sure what he meant by it, and it's now more often used as an omnibus description intended to convey the impression made by a Rutherford wine—its often somber fruit, its elusive depth of flavor, and the quiet power lurking behind the surface grace of its wines.

First flight

We started on the first 12 wines. Péju was fragrant and light; Monticello's Tietjen, balanced but still closed; Flora Springs' Hillside Reserve had an enticing blackcurrant nose, perfect balance, and exquisite finesse; the Sullivan estate wine, with good fruit, supple tannins, and impeccable balance, was one of my favorites of this first flight; another was the Round Pond Estate, with its open fruit, good structure, and hint of chocolate at the close; Frog's Leap was a very pure expression of Cabernet Sauvignon, though still a little austere; Honig, with good fruit, was more assertive than I had expected from past experience; William Harrison, offered as a

Bordeaux blend, showed good fruit but, perhaps because of the high proportion of Petit Verdot (29 percent) was clearly out of key with the other wines; Martin Estate's Collector's Reserve was another favorite, well proportioned, very Rutherford, nothing showy; Piña, too, was a favorite—an elegant wine yet surprisingly rich, with barely perceptible but very ripe tannins, giving it a velvety quality; Quintessa, another favorite, was bold, its fruit well defined by good acidity; Lieff's Morisoli showed distinctive character behind a fruity facade but was still youthfully tannic.

Flora Springs' Sean Garvey told me that the vineyard from which the family makes the Hillside Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon is one of their most difficult to cultivate. Tucked into the northwest corner of the AVA, it sprawls from its peak at 800ft (240m) down to the valley floor. The combination of steep slope, multiple exposures, and particularly old vines (hence that intense blackcurrant in the wine) is so difficult to handle that they were almost ready to give it up. Garvey said the 2007 vintage has saved it; they are so excited by the wine's fruit, structure, and complexity that they now have a manager devoted to the vineyard's special needs. The Martin Estate vineyard was replanted in 1996, reviving what had been the ancient HH Harris winery, established in 1887 and, though abandoned, is one of the oldest in Rutherford. In reestablishing the vineyard, the Martins used a mix of clones that has contributed as much to the success of their wines as has the favored site of the vineyard.

Clonal matters

A little background on the Cabernet Sauvignon clones used in Napa Valley might be useful at this point. The clone known simply as 8 is currently the most widely planted there. It was developed at UC Davis from cuttings taken from a vine in Concannon Vineyard in Livermore Valley in 1965 and then released to nurseries for propagation in 1971, just in time for

the major extension of vineyards in the valley. It is a reliable, late-maturing clone that gives the grapes plenty of time to develop flavor. It gives a substantial yield and in most years needs green-harvesting. Some growers prefer to mix it with clone 4, developed from cuttings brought to Davis from Mendoza in Argentina in 1964. It was thought then that a vine that had been long separated from Europe would have fewer viruses and present fewer problems. It gives particularly robust and vigorous wines, suited to some tastes but overwhelming if the proportion is high. Clone 6 is something of a jewel among the Cabernet Sauvignon clones in California. Before Prohibition closed down the experimental work barely started by the enology and viticulture department of the University of California (at that time still part of the Berkeley campus), Eugene Hilgard, its chairman, had set up experimental vineyards to test grape varieties and cultivation methods suitable for the varied conditions of California. One of them, at Jackson in the Sierra Foothills, was abandoned when the university was compelled to stop research into wine grapes. It was "found" again in 1963 and, though overgrown and in a neglected state, researchers took cuttings from a Cabernet Sauvignon vine they found there and brought it back to Davis for testing and possible propagation. It's thought the original cuttings planted at Jackson had come from Château Margaux. At any rate, the cuttings, made available to growers in 1969, gave wine remarkable for its deep color, intense aroma, and concentrated flavor allied to remarkable elegance and finesse. Its yields, alas, were small and barely economic. Though many growers planted it to add further personality to their wines, few could consider it as their principal clone. One of the largest plantings of it is in Andy Beckstoffer's George III vineyard in Rutherford. (Anthony Bell, another alumnus of Beaulieu Vineyard but now proprietor of Bell Winery, makes a Cabernet Sauvignon that is pure Clone 6, bought

from Beckstoffer's George III vineyard. The 2007 is a superb wine, delicious and astonishing in every way. To me, it is the apotheosis of Rutherford and Cabernet Sauvignon.) Lastly, there is clone 337, a recent arrival in Napa Valley from Bordeaux, in increasing favor for the much-prized, classic elegance of its wine.

At Martin Estate, where I was before this digression on clones, there is no clone 8. Instead, the vineyard is about one third clone 337, and the rest is clone 4 and clone 6. Knowing this combination of Cabernet Sauvignon clones in the vineyard certainly helps understand the wine.

Charles Thomas, the winemaker at Quintessa, described 2007 as a classic year for Cabernet Sauvignon. He told me that the short heat spell in early September was of little consequence to them, but the cool weather during the rest of the month and into October preserved in their fruit a bright, almost floral aroma supported by a fresh acidity. Quintessa is mostly Cabernet Sauvignon, with a little Cabernet Franc and, surprisingly, a touch of Carmenère — owners Agustín and Valeria Huneeus hail from Chile.

Second flight

The table at Rubicon Estate was reset, and we continued with the second flight of wines: Sawyer, another favorite, also showed good acidity in support of its intense fruit; Slaughterhouse, another fruit-driven wine but richer and even voluptuous (but then it was from a blend of clones 337 and 6, with a touch of violet-scented Cabernet Franc); Rutherford Grove, bright fruit, light texture, elegantly crafted; Provenance, concentrated, with smooth tannins and acidity well tucked in; Hewitt, sweet fruit, round and supple; Tres Sabores, impeccable, perfect balance, complete; Long Meadow Ranch, an expansive wine, but as is often the case with wines from organically grown grapes, in youth it is a little severe; Meander, another favorite, peppery on the nose, with good firm structure based on ripe tannins; Beaulieu Vineyards' Georges de Latour, pure elegance, muted and

complex fruit on the nose, and silky tannins on the palate; Rubicon Estate, another elegant wine but riper and more luscious than the Beaulieu; and Staglin, kept for last for good reason — ripe fruit, well-integrated tannins, a hint of oak, complete and stately.

After the set flights, I was also able to taste the Bell Cabernet Sauvignon, described above, Whitehall Lane's Millennium MM Vineyard, supple and graceful but showing, at present, a little too much oak; John Robert Eppler, another vibrant wine in which the fruit is well supported by fresh acidity; MCG Cellars' Scarlett, all fruit and grace; Sequoia Grove, elegantly balanced, its dark-fruit tones backed by supple and discreet tannins; and DR Stephens' Walther River Block Cabernet Sauvignon, a superb wine, with an intense blackcurrant nose and a long finish that seemed to unfold endlessly on the palate.

Brad Warner of Sawyer Cellars told me he picked his 2007 almost vine by vine on taste alone, virtually ignoring the sugar. He was more concerned with acidity levels and skin ripeness. When I read the note he sent me, I was reminded of what I had been told years ago by the *régisseur* of Château Pichon Longueville Comtesse de Lalande in Pauillac. "To check whether grapes are ready," he said, "I squeeze out the juice to avoid being distracted by the sugar. Then I just chew the skin." Jeffrey Stambor of Beaulieu Vineyard told me that for Georges de Latour they have gone back to using an old-fashioned basket press, too, to avoid undue pressure. I remembered how impressed I had been by the Georges de Latour's muted complexity and silky tannins and understood the impression they had made. Fredrik Johansson, of Staglin Family Vineyard, summed up the vintage by emphasizing yet again the small berry size that had allowed for good extraction of color and flavor without undue rigor. "In every decision I make," he said, "however small, if there is a choice, I always go in the direction of elegance rather than power." This year, particularly, that seems to have been true of every winemaker in Rutherford.

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