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FOOD & WINE

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WINES OF THE NAPA VALLEY



Wine *in the time of* Cholera

A Selection of Rutherford Preferred Wines

BY KENNETH FRIEDENREICH



TOP The historic Rutherford appellation sits at the center of Napa Valley. **ABOVE** A vision for quality in Napa Valley’s earliest days. George de Latour overlooking Beaulieu Vineyard 2, circa 1939.

READERS MAY NOTICE THAT I HAVE PILFERED, the title of a fine novel by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Pandemics seem to bring out if not the best in my fellow humans, at least their ingenuity and resourcefulness.

With bubbly thanks to Sara Soergel, executive director, and Steve Tonella, president of the Rutherford Dust Society, a Napa Valley-based trade association for growers, winemakers, farmers and local community, we conducted a wonderful experiment in social distancing. Ten of us gathered in the west hills’ backyard of oeno-fans Dick Stinson and Judy Erdman to share an anthology tasting from the Rutherford American Viticultural Area (AVA). The west hills loom above Portland, Oregon, so the palate tends toward Pinot Noir from the Willamette Valley rather than the go-to Cabernets of California’s best-known wine area.



Rutherford, California, founded 1879 has over 6,600 acres planted of many interesting individual varietals but is known for Cabernet Sauvignon—bold, inky, tannic, fruitful wines that are housed or produced in the AVA, perhaps 50 wineries in all.

What the Rutherford AVA offers most is an elusive characteristic known as “Rutherford Dust”. Its essence seems to be cocoa powder. More Nestle’s Quik than Godiva, but even this simile owes more to mystery than to a strict definition. Much of the planted acreage here spans the central floor of that valley and is therefore blessed with more sunshine and warmth than other comparable sub-AVAs in this valley of 45,000 planted acres. Its soil composition is a mix of gravel, loam, and sand set over a deep water table that causes roots to drill down and drain well.

What follows are the wines we tasted, in the order we tasted them. This will give readers some suggestions to acquire these wines. Please note that roughly 45% of all the acreage in the Rutherford AVA is Cabernet Sauvignon. The other principal varietals include, not surprisingly, other components of Bordeaux wines—Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Petite Verdot, etc. Among the other varietals in this AVA is a good representation of Sauvignon Blanc, such as the one produced by Steve Tonella.



LEFT Winemakers in the vineyards. Winemaker Emeritus Ted Edwards and Winemaker Kristy Melton.

BOTTOM LEFT A Bordeaux blend from S. R. Tonella Cellars features Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, and Malbec.

Elyse Winery, Morisoli Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, \$95 and Tietjen Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, \$125 are single-source Cabernet Sauvignon wines from independent family-run vineyards. Since 2018, the Elyse wine is made by Russell Bevan.

Neal Family Vineyards, “Rutherford Dust” Cabernet Sauvignon, \$90 is 100% certified organically farmed. A multi-generational effort, the Neals were grape growers first, and now produce wine of their own.

Tres Sabores, Rutherford Perspectives Cabernet Sauvignon, \$124 and Rutherford Zinfandel, \$50 represents a model for organic, biodiverse farming on the western Rutherford bench, led by owner-operator Julie Johnson.

S. R. Tonella Cellars, 2017 Rutherford Cabernet Sauvignon, \$125 and S. R. Tonella Cellars, 2016 Cabernet Blend Reserve, \$125 is culmination of over 100 continuous years in the wine business in Rutherford, Napa Valley—and the packaging says it all. A large 750 format all black, bold and elegant.

Beaulieu Vineyard, Georges de Latour Private Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, \$145 for this writer, the Beaulieu Vineyard Cabernet is perhaps the most expressive of its kind in this AVA, and certainly the wine with the longest pedigree.

Honig, Rutherford Cabernet Sauvignon, \$125 is an expressively Californian wine, produced by family owner-operators in the heart of Rutherford since 1980.

Freemark Abbey, Bosché Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, \$150, a stalwart Napa Valley producer, and the most akin to Bordeaux. Winemaker emeritus Ted Edwards celebrates his 40th harvest with Freemark Abbey this year, and welcomes Kristy Melton as winemaker.

Sullivan Rutherford, Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, \$110 also comes from hallowed grounds, as the 26-acre Sullivan estate was first planted by Andre Tchelistcheff, a friend of the original founder, James (“Jim”) O’Neill Sullivan.

In sum, these ten producers offer a good illustration of the Rutherford Dust. Living well, as the old scholars say, is the best revenge. These, our pandemic-strewn times, recall this good advice. **CH**

