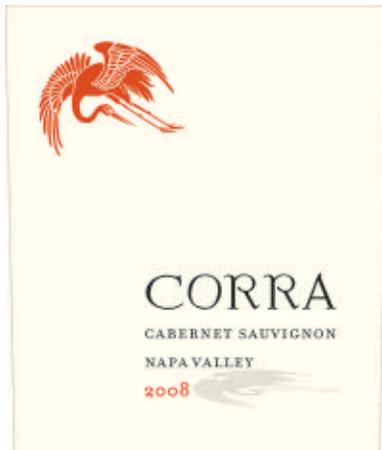


On Wine: Napa Cabernets

By Laurie Daniel For the Bay Area News Group – San Jose Mercury News

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The 2007 vintage for Napa Valley cabernet sauvignon was considered by many to be among the best ever. It garnered a 99 on the Wine Spectator's 100-point scale. When a vintage gets that kind of glowing press, the vintages on either side of it tend to fall a bit by the wayside: 2006 and 2008 are considered good, but mixed bags.

The recent Premiere Napa Valley trade tasting and auction provided opportunities to taste all three vintages. In addition to a blind tasting of the three vintages from a dozen wineries, held by the Napa Valley Vintners, smaller Napa appellations (such as Oakville and St. Helena) and individual wineries held numerous open houses and tastings during the two days before the auction.

After tasting scores of wines, I'm not climbing on the 2007 vintage bandwagon. If you love big, ripe, bold Napa Valley cab, it's probably the vintage for you. I prefer wines that are a little lighter on their feet.

Which brings me to the 2008 vintage. Spring frost greatly reduced the size of the crop, but the weather was very good during harvest, and that small crop got quite ripe. I was surprised to find that several tasty 2008s at the Napa Valley Vintners' tasting weighed in at 15 percent alcohol or more. But the wines have good acidity, and you can get away with a lot of ripeness if there's sufficient acidity to give the wine liveliness and keep it from tasting heavy.

Winemaker Celia Welch, a consultant for Napa wineries such as Scarecrow, Kever and Barbour, just released the 2008 vintage of her own brand, Corra (\$125). She says she's very pleased with the vintage.

"Definitely not the uber-ripe bruisers that the 2007s were," Welch says. "I think the '08s are perhaps a bit softer, maybe a bit lower in alcohol (in a good way), and clearly fruit-centered. I think that words like 'balanced' and 'food-friendly' get to be very much overused in our business, but really believe that the '08s in general will prove themselves to be just that." The 2008 Corra is dark and spicy, with ripe black fruit, savory notes of anise and peppercorn and fine tannins.