

## Uncorking Napa's History

By sampling many decades' worth of Napa bottlings at St. Helena's Press restaurant, writer Emily Kaiser Thelin goes on a kind of liquid trip through winemaking history—and learns that once upon a time, even the valley's famously polished Cabernets were once surprisingly rustic.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY BRIAN CRONIN

**O**VER THERE, you've got a 1981 Stony Hill Chardonnay," the sommelier whispered in my ear. "To your left, those guys are drinking a 2003 Etude Pinot Noir. And the group in back just popped open a 1996 Mumm DVX sparkler." At the steak house Press in Napa Valley, Kelli White mapped the room like a general reviewing her troops. "It's not even seven o'clock, and already the old wines outnumber the new," she said. "That's becoming pretty typical for a weeknight."

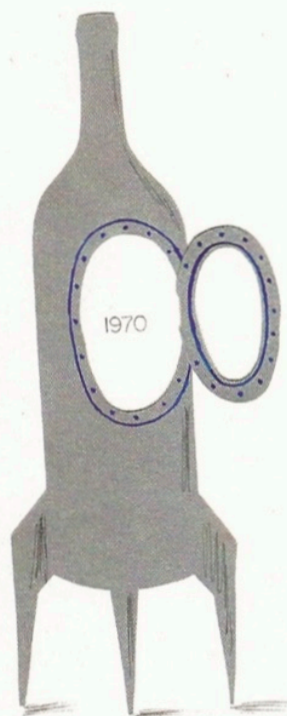
I had come to Press specifically to try as many old Napa wines as I could, to take a sort of liquid trip through Napa's winemaking history. Earlier this year, the steak house introduced one of the largest collections of old Napa wines in the world, with 10,000 bottles dating back to the 1940s. Press's owner, Leslie Rudd, recruited White and co-sommelier Scott Brenner from New York City to oversee the project. Now, as John Williams of Frog's Leap winery says, "You can't go in the place without tripping over a winemaker."

It helps that the restaurant keeps its markups moderate, so that most wines from the 1960s and '70s cost \$200 to \$500. While that's a high price for a weeknight bottle, it's less than the top cult releases—and much cheaper than a time machine.

### Napa Rising: the 1970s

"DO YOU WANT TO START in the 1970s?" White asked me as I sat at the bar. "Over there, Shannon Staglin and Carissa Mondavi just ordered a 1977 Beaulieu Vineyard Cabernet." The late '70s were arguably the first flowering of winemaking in the valley post-Prohibition, and Carissa Mondavi's grandfather Robert was arguably the man most responsible for that resurgence. She currently works for her father, Tim, the co-owner and winemaker of Continuum Estate.

*Emily Kaiser Thelin is a former food editor at Food & Wine. Her last story was "California Party on Tap" in April, 2012.*



*“My trip back in time left me staggered by Napa’s hidden history. I was stunned by how the wines changed from year to year.”*

Staglin was the one who'd chosen the Beaulieu, though. She suspected it had been made with grapes from the property her parents bought in 1985, now the Staglin Family Vineyard. White said, "That BV is stylistically spot-on for the '70s. It's important to remember that it was made before tools like sorting tables"—which allow workers to remove substandard fruit, bunch by bunch or even grape by grape—"and often before people were using French *barriques*." In the early '70s, oak barrels began supplanting the cruder redwood tanks many wineries used. "Also, back in the '70s, most of the grapevines were planted with this trellis system called California sprawl. The vines looked floppy and bushy compared to the manicured vines you see today, so they provided shade, but they provided it sort of indiscriminately [which led to uneven ripening]. Plus many vines had leafroll virus, which made it harder for the grapes to ripen. Scott and I weren't around at the time, of course"—Brenner was born in 1967, White in 1980—"but from what we've been told, the wines usually started out tasting rustic and tight. And yet, 40 years later, they've opened up into these sweetly fruited, balanced wines."

Mondavi and Staglin graciously offered me a spot at their table, along with a glass. Time had turned the BV's tannins almost to silk and given it a wonderful tobacco aroma and tart red-currant taste. "It really does remind me of my family's wine," Staglin said.

Yet what struck me was that the wine was so light—it actually paired well with a creamy, briny Caesar salad they'd ordered. It seemed so unlike today's massive Napa Cabernets, which never pair well with salad.

### The Valley Takes Off: the 1980s

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, as I was Googling "leafroll virus" by the bar, White nodded toward a large table littered with glasses. "Trio of winemakers straight ahead," she whispered. "They've just built their own 1980s vertical." The group, which included Hyde de Villaine's Stéphane Vivier, had >



### *the 1970s*

Many iconic Napa wineries were founded in the 1970s; a few achieved lasting fame in the Paris Tasting of 1976.



### *the 1980s*

The number of wineries doubled to more than 120—and wine critics became ever more influential.



### *the 1990s*

Cabernet and Chardonnay became Napa's king and queen, with prices to match.

ordered two Chardonnays—an '83 Stony Hill and an '84 Heitz—and a 1985 Forman Cabernet. Evidently it was an '80s moment: Across the way, Carissa Mondavi had just ordered an '88 Dalla Valle Cabernet, too.

If Napa got to its feet in the 1970s, it took off running in the '80s. The number of wineries doubled from about 60 to more than 120. New ventures included high-profile projects like Dominus Estate and Opus One, the latter a partnership between Robert Mondavi and Baron Philippe de Rothschild of Bordeaux's famed Château Mouton Rothschild; Opus One released its first wine in 1984. But newcomers, drawn by Napa Valley's romance and rising prestige, founded the majority of these wineries. They typically came with fortunes won in other fields: Garen Staglin made his in venture-capital and private-equity management, while Gustav Dalla Valle was co-owner of a scuba-equipment company.

"Dalla Valle and Forman are two of the best of that '80s generation," White said. "Their wines have more generous fruit up front, but they still retain the grip or structure of earlier wines. They were probably more delicious to drink young than those of the '70s, but they still had the structure to age."

The 1980s also saw a new focus on grape-growing methods. Up until the middle of that decade, most Napa vintners didn't worry about viticulture as much as they did winemaking—the fruit was merely the raw material for the art, which happened in the winery. But now vintners started to take this raw material more seriously, refining how they grew their grapes.

"This is a huge generalization," White added, "but Scott and I both think the 1985 vintage marks an important shift. It was a darker, deeper, more modern vintage—a starting point for a new era in Napa. A lot of people argue that the changes in viticulture caused the shift, like the spread of drip

irrigation. But I also see some wines becoming more slick, perhaps because of the rise of wine criticism." That seemed a safe guess to me—critics like Robert M. Parker, Jr., with his 100-point scoring system, first came to prominence in the mid-'80s. If riper, darker wines got more points, it would stand to reason winemakers would make more of them.

But whatever the cause, the '85 Forman and the '88 Dalla Valle were both substantial wines. They were rich with tannins and with the black fruit that has become the Napa Valley signature. In contrast, the 1977 Beaulieu, with its lean red-fruit flavors, almost tasted like aged Pinot Noir.

### **Bigger Than Ever: the 1990s & 2000s**

**BACK AT THE BAR,** White noticed that my time machine had stalled. No one in the dining room was ordering anything from the 1990s. "We should try to find you some truly hedonistic cult bottles—but even at our markups, they are brutally expensive," she warned.

While wine critics started to influence Napa winemaking in the mid-1980s, during the decade that followed they helped to radically transform it. But first Napa had to survive a devastating phylloxera outbreak, as well as an economic recession. Between the late '80s and mid-'90s, phylloxera—a root louse that destroys vines—forced the replanting of more than two-thirds of the valley's vineyards. But strangely enough, this disaster proved a gift. Post-epidemic, decades' worth of insight and experience informed the new vineyard plantings, and once the economy picked up again, the valley took off. By the early 2000s, the number of wineries in Napa had doubled again, to more than 230.

In the mid-1990s, tiny labels like Harlan Estate, Screaming Eagle and Bryant Family also released their first wines. Pro-

duced in minuscule amounts, these bottles garnered top scores and essentially created the “cult Cabernet” market, quickly commanding many times their initial prices at auctions and restaurants. (The most expensive wine on Press’s list the night I was there was a 1994 Harlan, at \$1,900.) Unsurprisingly, vintners around the valley hiked up prices as well, while people all over America acquired a taste for these big, powerful reds. In the late ’90s and well into the 2000s, Napa Valley became synonymous with pricey reds that were low in acid but rich in fruit, alcohol and viscosity. “Like falling into a pot of blackberry jam!” one critic raved about a particular favorite.

I asked which cult Cabs White liked best. “Colgin’s wines from the mid-’90s, the ones made by Helen Turley,” she said. “Those are tremendous. And Araujo is in some ways the perfect cult wine—even at its biggest, Araujo Cabernet is never overripe or over the top. And the ’99 Harlan is truly astounding, when you can find it.”

As White told me this, a wine from the ’90s finally made an appearance—sort of. A party in a private room had opened a magnum of 1994 Dunn Vineyards Howell Mountain Cabernet, but they weren’t inclined to share it with me. “Dunn is an anti-cult Cab in pretty much every way,” White said. “Randy Dunn’s wines are deliberately low in alcohol; even the 1994, which was a very ripe year.” Plus, she explained, the thick-skinned mountain fruit from Dunn’s vineyards resulted in wines that tended to be massively tannic, a far cry from the velvety cult-Cabernet style.

### ***The Future of Napa Wine: the 2010s***

I LANDED BACK IN THE PRESENT when a group of New Yorkers arrived—chef Alfred Portale of Gotham Bar and Grill; his wine director, Eric Zillier; and a couple of their friends. Spotting winemaker Dan Petroski a few tables away, they ordered a bottle of his 2010 Massican Annia, a refreshingly mineral and—particularly for Napa—esoteric blend of Tocai Friulano, Ribolla Gialla and Chardonnay.

“In the early days,” White said, “Napa vineyards were planted with a lot of alternative varieties, but phylloxera pretty much ended that. In the ’90s, Cabernet and Chardonnay really became king and queen. Lately, though, many more unusual grapes are popping up again—it’s an exciting time.”

That was surprising. With so much invested in its wines, Napa isn’t famous for taking risks—especially when prime vineyard land costs more than \$200,000 an acre—and Cabernet remains a much safer bet than something like Tocai Friulano. Even in the recession during the late 2000s, any good Napa Cabernet would reasonably net between \$65 and \$100 a bottle. Ribolla Gialla, not so much.

“There seems to be this new trend of young winemakers producing Cabernet for a big Napa winery and working on their freaky wines on the side,” White said. “It’s a great symbiotic relationship. With a regular paycheck, these winemakers feel more free to push the envelope with their own labels.”

It was now close to 11 o’clock. People in the dining room were still opening bottles, but I reluctantly decided I had traveled enough. My trip back in time had left me staggered by Napa’s hidden history. Before coming to Press, I had long clumped the valley’s wines under one stereotype: big, lush, high in alcohol and even higher in price—something to drink when someone else was paying. At Press, I was stunned by how much the flavors changed from year to year, from winemaker to winemaker. And it made me wonder: Would Napa Valley stay true to its reputation, producing mainly intense, powerful Cabernets? Or was that due to change? If only I could come up with a way to travel to the future to find out. ●