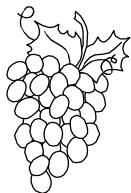


FROM THE GRAPEVINE

BY [JOEL M. FISHER](#)



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As another summer mellows and wanes, August has proven to be a month of culinary and enological delights.

Wine, Vine & Dine launched with a French wine dinner at **Zucca** and a Spanish wine dinner at **Vermont Restaurant**. I'm thrilled with the response we've been getting. Next up is a September 28th Sherry and Tapas wine dinner, also at the excellent Vermont Restaurant. Contact me for further details if you're interested in coming to this event or joining our email list.

I recently had the pleasure of attending a private wine dinner held at the gracious West Hollywood home of Pat and Warren Kourt. Warren, a Stanford professor of Petroleum Engineering and wine devotee, was an original shareholder of [La Jota Wines](#) and a wine writer for a Palo Alto newspaper. The centerpieces of the tasting menu were three La Jota wines – a 1995 *Howell Mountain*, a 1993 *Twelfth Anniversary*, and a 1986 *Howell Mountain* –paired with barbequed lamb. The wines held up extremely well considering their vintages. The 1995 Howell Mountain rated first of the flight. We found it to be muscular and rich, with berry aromas and traditional tannins and acidity. It's still aging nicely and could be cellared for longer. The full-bodied and well-balanced 1993 Twelfth Anniversary was also a superb pairing with the lamb, proving it could hold its own with a nose of chocolate and cassis. This bottle seemed like it could either be enjoyed now or be saved for a few more years. We also sampled other bottles with dinner, including a 2000 *Stags Leap*, a 1999 *Stags Leap Fay*, a 1997 *Chateau St. Jean Cinq Cepages*, a 2001 *Origins* and a 1999 *Chateau Haut-Brion*. I brought the Origins along that night. I liked the wine, but it fared about fifth in this lot.

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I recently attended the annual conference of the [Society of Wine Educators](#), which this year was hosted near Santa Rosa in Rohnert Park. I found this event to be a real learning experience! I began the week with an eight-hour emersion into the world of Bordeaux. Robin Kelly O'Connor, the U.S. representative of the Bordeaux Wine School and President of the Society of Wine Educators, led us through more than 25 Bordeaux selections. Among the most notable was the *Chateau Belgrave 2001* (a fifth growth of the 1855 classification), which had mint and black fruit early on the nose. On the palate

were Cabernet flavors, emerging fruit and plenty of tannins. The *Chateau De Malle 1998* is a second-growth sauterne, which had a nice white-yellow color, a lovely floral aroma and an elegant honeyed taste.

We headed for Napa on the second day of the conference. Our first stop was **Nickle and Nickle**, created by the owners of [Far Niente](#). The tasting room is a reconstructed 1776 New Hampshire barn, which makes for a great setting. We tasted four of their wines. I liked their *Dragon Fly Cabernet Sauvignon 2001* (\$90), a sophisticated wine with a lighter color and lots strawberry jam on the nose and palate.

Our next visit was to Agustin Hunneus' wonderful [Quintessa](#). I was interested to discover that Hunneus had bought the property from the heirs of famed restaurateur George Mardikian. The vineyard is managed by Valeria Hunneus, and Sarah Gott is the talented winemaker. Phillipe Melka, a graduate of the Society's Bordeaux program, is consulting winemaker.

We continued to [Beaulieu](#), better known to all as "BV." Joel Butler, one of the few U.S. Masters of Wine, is the main winemaker here. The chief educator is Joel Aitken, also a Master of Wine. In the old BV family home, we spread out for an unusual tasting and lunch. The first five glasses were *2002 BV Pinot Noir* clones, showing how blending affects the finished product. We then tasted a finished *2002 BV Reserve Carneros Pinot Noir* (\$35), which opened up nicely in the glass with good fruit. Another notable bottle that we sampled was the *2001 Georges de Latour Private Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley* (\$85). The smooth wine, which displayed muted fruit on the nose, had been aged in new barrels made from French and American oak.

After lunch we moved on to [Grgich Hills](#). Master winemaker Mike Grgich wasn't there but his nephew, Vice President of Vineyards and Production Ivo Jeramaz, led us on a Zinfandel tasting. I really enjoyed the *Zinfandel, Miljenko's Old Vine 2001*, which was juicy and full of jam-like berries. The finish was long and had some plum on the end. Also notable was the spicy, young *Zinfandel, Miljenko's Old Vine 2003 Barrel Sample*. We tried a *Plavac Mali, Croatia 1997*, which exemplified Zinfandel's Croatian antecedents. We finished with *Zinfandel, Sonoma 1994*, which disappointingly had taken a downhill turn and was showing a musty nose.

Our next stop was the [Robert Mondavi Winery](#), where Master Sommelier and Certified Wine Expert Giles de Chambrun whisked us by bus to Mondavi's Kalon Vineyard. After a tour, we returned to the winery for a tasting and for dinner. To refresh ourselves, we started with the *2001 Robert Mondavi Winery Napa Valley Fume Blanc*. This thirst-quenching wine had bright floral fruit and a mineral cast, followed by a creamy finish. The wine has 1% Semillion mixed into the Sauvignon Blanc. Our hosts paired a seared wild salmon starter with a strong *2001 Robert Mondavi Winery To Kalon Vineyard I Block Fume Blanc*. The main dish was rack of lamb with chanterelles and herb au jus, accompanied by both a *2000 Robert Mondavi Winery Stags Leap District Cabernet Sauvignon* and a *2000 Robert Mondavi Oakville Cabernet Sauvignon*. The former is a seductive, silky blend with great fruit forward and fine tannins. The latter was downright

velvety, presenting crème de cassis and hints of blackberry and vanilla on the tongue. For dessert, I sipped a fabulous *1999 Robert Mondavi Winery Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc Botrytis*. This had it all when it came to undertones – guava, orange zest, apricot, almonds, vanilla and spice – and is a good example of noble rot in a dessert wine.

The next day many of us traveled to Napa to a tasting hosted by the [Napa County Vintners Association](#). I really worked the tables here, trying the latest from Napa wineries large and small. Particularly enjoyable was the [Dominari 2002 Cabernet Sauvignon](#) (\$75) which was smooth and full of cherries. I had a nice visit with Stephen Parry, owner of [Parry Cellars](#). His is a niche operation, making only 190 cases a year of his *Parry Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon* (\$46). While his output may be small, it can be found in Los Angeles at [Spago, A.O.C.](#), and the [Woodland Hills Wine Store](#).

Next I visited with the [Rocca Family Vineyards](#) owners. Mary Rocca and her husband are making up to 400 cases of each varietal with grapes from the Stags Leap area of Napa. I already knew I liked their Cabernet, so I was pleased to discover that their smooth *Rocca Family Vineyards 2001 Syrah* and spicy *2001 Cabernet Sauvignon* are equally notable.

Finally, I finished my tasting and my trip with [Spelletich's Cellars](#). [Barbara Spelletich](#) is an experienced wine industry veteran. Her husband, Timothy, comes from a food background, including having worked for St. Helena's famous [Tra Vigne Restaurant](#) as a manager and wine buyer. They now produce a spicy *2000 Cabernet Sauvignon* (\$41) and a smooth Merlot-blend *2001 Bodog Red Napa Valley* (\$27) that I quite liked.

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Well, that does it for that trip and this column. Enjoy the dog days of summer, and I'll catch up with you again in the fall. In the meantime, happy drinking!

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