

American Wines Come of Age

But, you better take a second mortgage. They don't come cheap.

by Roger Mummert

California winemakers never tire of telling the tale. A quarter century ago, British wine merchant Steven Spurrier staged a blind comparison tasting for a group of French wine experts gathered in Paris. Masked from sight were the labels on four California cabernets and four California chardonnays from the early 1970s, set alongside an equal number of premier grand crus from Bordeaux and top white wines from Burgundy.



California kicked butt.

The French experts had their egos turned inside out as they were informed that their famed palates had rated the upstart American wines more appealing than their own classics from hallowed French soil. For keenly interested wine lovers around the world, these findings signaled a changing of the minds, if not the guards. This event also may have sparked an escalation in wine prices that shows no sign of abating.

Today, prices of top Bordeaux first-growths have hit astronomical heights, as thunderous demand outstrips availability. Half a world away – but in a different and distinctly American way – select California cabernets have been elevated to legendary status and command dizzying prices. These wines are known as *cult*, *boutique* or even *back room* wines. They are crafted by renowned winemakers, some of whom own no land but purchase select grapes and rent facilities to “micro-produce” just a few hundred cases of precious juice each year.

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As a general rule, boutique wines are made from low-yield vineyards and often from old vines, two factors that intensify the flavor of the fruit. To be sure, the process is costly, but these winemakers are freed from the economics of corporate-owned wineries that mandate double-digit growth through higher and higher yields. And to date, there has been little price resistance to wines that premier at \$150 a bottle and can increase exponentially in market value – provided the hype flows more freely than the wine itself.

Initially, the hype for boutique wines was contributed by wine newsletters and their influential publishers whose private tasting notes could put a jolt into the

going prices of these hard-to-find products. More recently, Internet chat rooms have accelerated (and some say democratized) the hype process. Today, just the rumor of a rave review by an online nose-it-all can send the price of a hot cult wine to \$1,000 at an online wine auction. That's per bottle ... for a recent release.

In with the in crowd

Who's paying these prices? Consumers who are susceptible to unbridled hype and to the urge to possess the best at any cost.

Donald Gillette caters to this crowd. Gillette is the wine specialist at the Napa Valley Winery Exchange in San Francisco, where boutique California wines are featured. He continually scours the vinous landscape for micro-producers of the highest quality and then "premiers" about 40 small producers each year. It's part of the cachet that these winemakers have names familiar in California winemaking circles, but are unknown to the greater wine drinking public.

Among Gillette's recent "discoveries" are wines from such non-household names

CALIFORNIA CULT WINES: Buy Them If You Can...

The following are currently hot California micro-producer wines, available to the very rich ... or very lucky.

Screaming Eagle: This wine is the current "hot hand." Only 500 cases are produced annually, and three bottles per customer is the rule for this cabernet/merlot blend. The mailing list is closed at this time, but watch the website for availability. The wine is so overvalued, that some owners can be coaxed to trade a bottle – for a case of wine of similar quality.

(707) 944-0749

P.O. Box 134, Oakville, Ca. 94562

www.screamingeagle.com

Harlan Estate: You can't even get into the website of this tiny powerhouse in Oakville in Napa Valley. They produce about 1,325 cases of a cabernet sauvignon blend. The winery, which was founded in 1991 by H. William Harlan, sells its wines only to premier restaurants and through a selective mailing list, with just small amounts going to retail. The winery "pre-releases" its wines at \$175 a bottle, but they soar to \$350 to \$400 at retail – and far more in restaurants (it was recently on the list at The Bellagio in Las Vegas for \$1,400).

(707) 944-1441

P.O. Box 352, Oakville, Ca. 94562

www.harlanestate.com

Dalla Valle: This miniscule vineyard on Napa's Silverado Trail has a limited output of less than 3,500 cases and maintains a waiting list for direct sales. They produce a Cabernet Sauvignon for \$100, a "Maya" Proprietary Blend Red Wine (\$125) and a Sangiovese "Pietre Rosse" (\$35).

(707) 944-2676

P.O. Box 329, Oakville, Ca.

No website ... Email: ndv@dallavallevineyards.com

Pahlmeyer: This rareness of Pahlmeyer's wines was part of the "set up" in the movie *Disclosure*, (remember Michael Douglas lighting up at receiving their '91 chardonnay as a gift from seductress Demi Moore?). The winery produces just under 5,000 cases of wine in total: merlot (\$80), chardonnay (\$60) and a proprietary Bordeaux-style red wine that blends cabernet sauvignon with cabernet franc, petit verdot and malbec. The latter sells for \$85 from the winery, but it's gone as high as \$120 at retail and even higher at auctions. The winery maintains a select mailing list and holds allegiances to long-term customers, who are issued a user name and pass code to place orders on the website.

(707) 255-2321

P.O. Box 2410, Napa, Ca. 94558

www.pahlmeyer.com

as Montallegro Vineyard, a cabernet producer in the Santa Cruz Mountains; Linne Calodo Winery, which produces sirah in Paso Robles along the Central Coast; and J.C. Cellars, an East Bay micro-winery that makes zinfandel and sirah from premier grapes bought from around the state.



Commonly, these kinds of micro-producers can't grow in size: If they own land it's a small property, and their vines are limited or small-yielding. Often, they don't want to grow. Their smallness and reputation allow them to play by a separate set of economics. They sell direct and gain full profit for the wines they produce since they don't carve up their sales with distributors and retailers whom they obviously don't need.

The "hot hand"

The "hot" micro-producers can "allocate" only a few bottles of their wines per

Spottswode Winery: Spottswode produces a cabernet sauvignon and a sauvignon blanc, both in extremely limited quantities. The 1997 cabernet leaves the vineyard at \$75 a bottle. Cabernet production began in 1982, and the wine is known for intensity and elegant power.

(707) 963-0134

1902 Madrona Ave., St. Helena, Ca. 94574

www.spottswode.com

And Two Not-So-Cultish Wines...

These are two notable red wines produced not as boutique wines but as high-profile winery projects designed to fulfill the promise that California could produce wines as great as any in the world.

Opus One: This wine was begun in 1979 as a collaboration between the Mondavis, the first family of Napa, and Baron Philippe de Rothschild of Château Mouton-Rothschild in Bordeaux. By the mid-'90s, this super-premium wine had hit \$250 a bottle, and prices have climbed since then. If you can't afford it, you have two options. Taste it at the winery (\$25 a glass) or visit the website for delicious year-by-year tasting notes.

(707) 944-9442

7900 St. Helena Highway, Oakville, Ca. 94562

www.opusonewinery.com

Dominus: The Bordeaux-style red wine produced here represents a serious foray into Napa Valley by legendary Pomerol winemaker Christian Moieux of Château Pétrus, one of the most sought-after wines in the world. Since 1983, Moieux has crafted this wine in the French style from premier California cabernet grapes with a blend of cabernet franc, merlot and petit verdot.

(707) 944-8954

P.O. Box 3327, Yountville, Ca. 94599

www.dominusestate.com

Online Auctions for Cult Wines

Some of the most obscure (read that most costly) wines are mostly available for direct purchase through online auctions. Beware, there are no fixed prices here; wines are sold at "auction." If you're buying, you enter a bid (an opening bid price is suggested), and you are contacted if you "win." That affords you the privilege of shelling out, in some cases, \$1,000 for a highly coveted bottle of wine that may have recently left the winery for one tenth that amount. Here are some online auctions to check out:

winebid.com

uvine.com

person to devoted consumers on their mailing lists – and for premium prices (the current ceiling is about \$150 a bottle). Some wineries maintain waiting lists, which hopeful buyers can join through the winery website. A few micro-producers issue small amounts of wine to select retailers, who commonly earmark these bottles for special customers. If you're at the end of this feeding chain, your only hope is to go to online auctions where the going prices for these highly rated and hard-to-find wines can blow through all previous price ceilings.

"A rave review can set the price of a wine soaring," Gillette explains. "When it comes to online auctions, the 'hot hand' gets the best price." Prices soar so high, Gillette says, that top-priced wines often are not drunk; they sit quietly in temperature-controlled warehouses while speculators buy and trade them on paper.

Over the last several years, a cabernet produced by Screaming Eagle has led the price charge. To Gillette's experienced palate, the tiny winery consistently pro-

AND AMERICAN FOODS TO MATCH

Just as prices of California boutique wines have soared, so have the costs of occupying (even for a few precious hours) the most sought-after restaurant seats in wine country. At the pinnacle of the vinous restaurant scene lies The French Laundry in Yountville, in the heart of Napa Valley. Chef/owner Thomas Keller is a chef at the top of his game, capable of making startling culinary statements – and scoring a reservation there (taken two months in advance of a dining date) makes a statement about you, the discerning diner.

Keller's cuisine draws from classic French techniques, but it is American to the core. His cooking features locally grown "heirloom" vegetables, and he recently featured a seasonal "celebration" of various forms of tomatoes (cherry, plum, early girl, ruby pearl). Dotting the menu are calling cards from the many boutique produce and game farmers that blanket the region like wildflowers by the roadside. At The French Laundry, even a baked potato has lineage: it's a "Weber Ranch russet."

Among notable specialties on The French Laundry's various tasting menus: "Tongue in Cheek," a braised beef cheek and veal tongue dish that's accompanied by baby leeks, garden greens and horseradish cream. Some dishes achieve three-line descriptions, as in the pan roasted Hoffman Farm squab with duck foie gras ... (some chefs might have stopped there) ... and sweet white corn and

applewood smoked bacon "risotto" cake.

For Keller, as with a fashion designer, much of the magic is in the accessories. Witness such plate trimmings as crystallized apple chips, parmesan crisps, arugula purée and mascarpone sorbet – a particularly amazing juxtaposition of unctuousness and refreshment.

If you're game to try some of these culinary concoctions at home, recipes are found in *The French Laundry Cookbook*, and some dishes are pictured on the website.

The French Laundry, which opened as a restaurant in 1994, takes its name from the century-old former steam laundry in which it is housed. The restaurant seats just 62, and outdoor seating is available in the lovely gardens that surround the historic building. There is a prix fixe (\$65), a vegetarian tasting menu (\$70), a five-course tasting menu (\$80) and a nine-course degustation menu (\$95). With a superb wine list and a good appetite, however, these price points are only a beginning.

The French Laundry
6640 Washington Street
Yountville, Ca. 94599
(707) 944-2380

www.napavalley.com

No jeans or tennis shoes, and jackets are required for men (ties optional).

American Wines Come of Age

duces one of the best cabernets in the state – but it's no better than 20 other cabs from boutique wineries, along with reserve cabs from some major producers (Mondavi, Dominus, Beringer).

"If a wine like Screaming Eagle is fetching \$1,000 a bottle, a collector might trade it in for a whole case of wine of equal quality," says Gillette.

Unbelievably, the hype process itself appears to be accelerating, in Gillette's view. "Now, just a rumor that a rave review is going to appear creates wild jumps in prices, and the wine sells out even before the review is in print," Gillette says. He cites the example of a wine being named "wine of the week" from the consumer magazine *Wine Spectator*. If the news is posted online at 3 p.m., by 3:05 he is besieged by a flurry of calls asking, "Have you got it? Can I buy it?"

Who has the privilege of buying the coveted bottle? Apparently, the buyer with one hand on a mouse and the

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other on speed dial. "It's immediacy created by scarcity," says Gillette, "and the early bird gets the worm." ▲

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