Napa Cabernet Triumphs Again
A stunning vintage in 2009 yields a bounty of great wine

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What makes the 2009 vintage in Napa (96 points on Wine Spectator's 100-point scale) distinctive is that it combines the best attributes of two prior classics—2007 (Napa: 97) and 2008 (Napa: 96). The '07s are opulent and richly flavored; the '08s are denser and more refined. The 2009s are rich and polished, ripe without being overripe, displaying great structure and finesse. Launching the string of excellent years were the concentrated 2006s (95).

The 2009s, like their counterparts from 2006, 2007 and 2008, are wines that are candidates both for drinking now and for cellaring a decade or more. These four vintages are sure to inspire debate as to which year is the standout. Each has its galaxy of stars and unique personalities.

Since last year's coverage focusing on the 2008 vintage ("Nearing the Summit," Nov. 15, 2011), close to 700 Cabernets have been reviewed in blind tastings conducted in Wine Spectator's Napa office. The lion's share of that total, approximately 465 wines, comes from 2009, while about 185 are from 2008. Napa, the undisputed king of Cabernet in California, contributes more than 625 wines, and overwhelmingly dominates the list of top-rated wines. Among the 2009s tasted so far, 31 have rated a classic 95 points or higher.

Five wines vie for wine of the vintage, all with 97-point ratings. They include a trio from Schrader—T6 Beckstoffer To Kalon ($175), Beckstoffer To Kalon (Old Sparky) MMIX ($400/1.5L), and the Rutherford GIII Beckstoffer Georges III ($175)—as well as Screaming Eagle ($750), also in Oakville, and Tor Howell Mountain Cimarossa Vineyard ($75).

Other top performers from 2009, all rating 96 points, include Harlan Estate ($750), Colgin Tychson Hill ($325), Spottswoode Family Estate Grown ($145), Hundred Acre Few and Far Between ($400), Bond Pluribus ($285) and Bevan The Curmudgeon ($150).

Another 20 wines rate 95 points, including another trio from Schrader, and a pair each from Bryant Family, Tor and Carter. This group also takes in perennial standouts Dalla Valle Maya ($250); Peter Michael Les Pavots Knights Valley ($175), the highest-rated wine from Sonoma County; and Ridge Monte Bello, from the Santa Cruz Mountains ($150).

The Monte Bello is one of the finest young wines from this historic vineyard that I can recall tasting. It is the most Bordeaux-like of California Cabernets, with its tight structure and longevity.

Of special note are the wines from Andy Beckstoffer's To Kalon vineyard in Oakville (see "The Evolution of To Kalon Vineyard," page 33). The number of producers using grapes from Beckstoffer To Kalon is a consequence of the unbridled success of wines from this site. A decade ago, only Robert Mondavi used the To Kalon designation, on his Fumé Blanc. In 2008, a total of 18 Cabernets carried the Beckstoffer To Kalon designation, and so far from 2009 I've tasted 21 wines from this 89-acre vineyard, all but two scoring 90 points or higher.

While high-end Napa Cabernets routinely top $150 a bottle, there are plenty of choices available for much less, including
Paloma (95) at $54. The gorgeous Beringer Knights Valley Reserve 2009 (94, $45) and the companion Knights Valley 2009 (91, $27) are prime examples of the level of quality coming from this Sonoma County site. Beringer made its first Knights Valley bottling in 1976, and winemaker Laurie Hook has taken quality up a couple of notches with these two wines.

Also impressive for their quality-price ratios are the Hess Collection Mount Veeder 2008 (92, $48), Honig 2009 (92, $40) and Chappellet Signature 2009 (90, $49).

The beauty of Napa Cabernets is that they are made in a fashion that shows charm in youth, with pure currant and dark berry flavors, fleshy textures and fine-grained tannins. But they are also engagingly complex, with room for development.

Napa's ripe tannins make the wines readily accessible but also give them backbone and provide traction for the flavors. Nearly all of the 2009s should mature slowly and gracefully, developing the subtle nuances and tertiary flavors that come with age. While deciding when to open them is a personal choice, by six years in bottle they reach a prime drinking plateau, and usually stay that way another decade or more.

Describing the depth and purity of the best 2009s leads to a multitude of superlatives built around the core aromas of berry, loamy earth, sage and spice. "Overall, the 2009 wines remind me of 2005," says Philippe Melka, owner of Melka winery and winemaker for a dozen other wineries, including Dana and Brand Napa Valley, a new venture on Pritchard Hill (see "Napa's Pritchard Hill," page 49). The wines are "very juicy, vibrant and generous, with ripe red fruits, soft, good acidity and powerful tannins," he adds.

With time, Melka and others expect the 2009s to show even greater sophistication and complexity, inviting comparisons with years such as 1999 and 2006, among others. "It's a vintage which should satisfy sommeliers, as the wines are very approachable already, but also collectors as they have a great aging potential," says Melka.

"I'm pretty happy with the consistency of the wines we made, given all the late drama," says Thomas Brown, owner of Rivers-Marie and also winemaker for a dozen other brands, including Schrader. A powerful, mid-October rainstorm threatened the crop for a few days, but ultimately caused little damage. "It's a nice consistent vintage, maybe not the usual number of home runs but not as many busts either."

Andy Erickson, owner of Favia and the winemaker in 2009 for Screaming Eagle and Ovid, has a similar view. "The wines are there in terms of richness," he says, "just maybe not as flamboyant as we're used to."

"I'm seeing all the right elements-deep color, full flavor, rich mouthfeel, balance," adds Shafer Vineyards' winemaker Elias Fernandez. "I still feel that the wines of 2009 are some of the best of the decade."

The 2009 vintage played into the hands of those winemakers seeking more restraint and refinement in their wines, avoiding what I call the berry pie level of ripeness that some find sweet and jammy.

"Overall, the 2009 wines are more structured and similar to how they showed immediately after fermentation," says Jeffrey Stambor, winemaker at Beaulieu Vineyards. "[They] will take some time to fully evolve. They remind me of the 2006, or even the 1999 vintage more than the 2008 or 2007. I appreciate the more restrained nature of the vintage-it's one that will require a little patience, but with a great reward."

While 2009 was a drought year, there was sufficient rainfall, including some in May, for the vines to flourish. In addition, there were no damaging frosts as occurred in 2008. Still, there were moments of drama.

After a mild summer and with the crop reaching optimal ripeness, a fierce storm threatened in the middle of harvest. In early October, as the vineyards were being picked, forecasts showed the remnants of a Pacific typhoon headed toward the state. The threat gave winegrowers an adrenaline rush, with most accelerating their harvests. Most vineyards were picked before the Oct. 12 deluge, which dropped up to 6 inches of rain in some locales, arrived.

Grapes still hanging after the storm needed another week or more to dry out before coming off the vine, and good wines were made from fruit picked before or after the rain. If there is a weak seam in the vintage it shows in some of the cooler sites and vineyards with small crop loads. Those wines exhibit more herbal flavors and grittier tannins.

"I remember the 2009 vintage by the mid-October storm-not so much a tale of two harvests but two acts of the same play,"
says Stambor. "It had already been a long growing season, so we had picked a large part of our bench vineyards [in Rutherford] before the rain. These wines have great density and concentration of fruit, as we were able to fully extract from the skins. Those picked after the rain didn't really suffer. They had been close to optimal [ripeness] and the open canopies [and] clusters dried out quickly, allowing us to resume picking within a few days."

Celia Welch, owner-winemaker of Corra and winemaker for Scarecrow, says the mild summer and October rains are the primary factors that shaped the seasonal variation in wine styles in 2009. "The best Cabernets from 2009 display fabulous inky-dark color and completely ripe tannins," she says. They reflect the jumpstart afforded vintners by dry winter months and judicious crop-load management.

Winemakers described the infant 2009s as very tannic, though they have fleshed out in bottle. "The tannin early on reminded me a bit of 2006," says Brown. The evenness in quality of the vintage, he adds, is reflected by the fact that the variety of vineyard locations he oversees-extending from Dry Creek Valley (Kinsella) to Oakville (Schrader), Rutherford, Diamond Mountain (GTS) and Howell Mountain (Outpost)-performed on a similarly high level.

When it comes to other Cabernet regions, most, such as Sonoma, Santa Cruz and Paso Robles, produce very good and some outstanding wines, but nowhere in the quality realm of Napa. Knights Valley is the brightest spot for Cabernet in Sonoma. Along with Beringer, Peter Michael, Delectus, Adobe Road and Knights Bridge are making impressive wines from this district.

The next two vintages on deck, 2010 and 2011, are far more variable in quality in both Napa and Sonoma. Excellent wines were made both years, but likely far fewer than in other recent vintages, and quantity was down significantly, as many vineyards were either not picked or winemakers declassified lesser lots.

For now, Cabernet lovers should focus on the 2009 vintage, as well as some late-release 2008s. If your cellar is stocked, you'll be in position to be more selective when it comes to 2010. With the run of the four outstanding vintages from 2006 to 2009 there's plenty to choose from.

Senior editor James Laube is Wine Spectator's lead taster on California Cabernet Sauvignon.

- James Laube's Recommended California Cabernets (in PDF Format)
- Napa Valley Wine Map (in PDF Format)