

THE POUR

California Wines Score Style Points

By Eric Asimov

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The polarizing years of California wine are over. No longer can its styles be summed up in a descriptive phrase or two, like plush, concentrated cabernet sauvignon; lush, jammy pinot noir; buttery oak-bomb chardonnay; or extravagantly ripe, blockbuster zinfandel.

Those dominant styles gave the impression of a monochromatic wine culture, in which more was good and even more was better. Many people embraced these wines and still do. But a significant minority dismissed them and California wines in general, though in truth, a careful search could have always turned up producers who valued finesse and subtlety but were largely ignored by critics.

Now California can be characterized by its stylistic diversity. Partly, this is because of a widening and maturing of consumer tastes. These days, the public is less reliant on two or three dominant wine critics who essentially share the same perspective. More important, though, a new wave of energetic California winemakers has helped to push stylistic boundaries while bringing more attention to older producers who had been considered behind the times or out of fashion.

These newer producers have been shaped by the same worldwide diversity of wines as their audience. They have been inspired not just by Bordeaux and Burgundy, Napa Valley and a neighboring producer whose wines received 100-point scores. Instead, they've looked to the traditions of northeastern Italy and the Jura, of Galicia and Sicily, of the Rhône Valley, Slovenia and many other lesser-known regions that make this moment so exciting for wine lovers. Their aim is not to slavishly copy these wines, but to be loyal to their inspirations while reflecting their California origins.



A cork from Martian Ranch and Vineyard.

Some of these new-wave producers have been recognized as stars in their own right, like Arnot-Roberts, Copain, Scholium Project and Wind Gap. Many others are on the rise, gradually gaining attention as their wines are tasted and their names passed around. Few own land yet, and if they do it's in less-acclaimed regions. Most buy grapes from trusted vineyard sources. Many, in fact, have full-time jobs in the wine industry and make their own wines on the side.

They exist, and excel, largely outside the realm of the familiar wine authorities whose scores in the past could have made or broken a winery. Most make small amounts of wine, and so particular bottles are often difficult to find. Here are 10 of them, in alphabetical order, all producers worth seeking out in case you spot them in a store or on a restaurant wine list.

Bedrock Wine Company specializes in intense wines made from very old vines, with the aim of capturing and expressing California's wine heritage. Its zinfandels are simultaneously powerful, richly fruity yet agile and well balanced, perhaps not surprising since Bedrock was founded by Morgan Twain-Peterson, son of Joel Peterson, the founder of Ravenswood, a signature zinfandel producer. I especially like Bedrock's Ode to Lulu rosé, made of old-vine mourvèdre in the Bandol style, fresh, vibrant and lightly floral with an underlying savory note and a steely spine of acidity.

Birichino, a new venture from alumni of Bonny Doon Vineyard, makes wines from Mediterranean grapes grown on the Central Coast and in Lodi. I've yet to have the rosé or the malvasia Bianca, but I loved its 2011 grenache from the Besson Vineyard; fresh, fragrant, sweetly fruity and deliciously spicy.

Broc Cellars makes excellent, nuanced, reasonably priced wines from a variety of sources, including zinfandel and Rhône-style grapes, but I especially enjoyed a spicy, gently fruity, slightly herbal cabernet franc from Paso Robles. Chris Brockway, the winemaker, is also involved in Broadside, which makes a terrific, reasonably priced cabernet sauvignon from Paso Robles that is a great value.

La Clarine Farm makes wines that are alive in the glass. Hank Beckmeyer and Caroline Hoel own land in the Sierra foothills, which they farm according to the principles of the Japanese agricultural philosopher Masanobu Fukuoka. They purchase grapes from like-minded farmers. I love their minimalist approach in the vineyard and the cellar, and I've loved all their wines, whether mourvèdre, rosé or the 2011 Piedi Grandi, a blend of nebbiolo, mourvèdre and syrah that is precise, savory, juicy and just plain delicious.

Dirty & Rowdy, a side project of two couples in the wine industry, makes the sort of wines you cannot mass-produce — naturalistic, hazy to the point of cloudy, with whites made somewhat in the style of reds so that you can feel the tannins. The 2011 sémillon, a grape with much untapped potential, was brilliant, with a lip-smacking texture and subtle aromas and flavors that kept me coming back for more. There's also a mourvèdre, a grape that, like the sémillon, is rewarding renewed exploration.

Donkey & Goat winery has its own manifesto, and how can you not love a winery with a manifesto? This husband-and-wife team (don't ask which is the donkey) does a fine job of abiding by its minimalist principles. I've enjoyed many of its Rhône-style wines, especially its Prospector mourvèdre — there's that grape again — a powerful yet balanced wine with savage dark fruit and a refreshing, savory edge.

Kesner Wines is the creation of Jason Kesner, who has quite the day job. He's the assistant winemaker and vineyard overseer at Kistler Vineyards, a trailblazing Sonoma producer of chardonnays and pinot noirs. Under his own label, he makes excellent chardonnays and pinot noirs that are models of precision and restraint, as well as a grenache and a red blend.

Martian Ranch and Vineyard uses a variety of Spanish and French grapes to produce wines that are otherworldly in their calibration and deliciousness — fresh, refreshing, complex and intriguing. I have especially liked the lively albariño and the beautifully fragrant grenache blanc. Why Martian? The proprietor, Nan Helgeland, named Martian Ranch after her sons, Martin and Ian. Disappointingly prosaic? Perhaps. As the Web site says, "The Martian seen occasionally on the premises is as much a mystery to her as it is to anyone else."

Massican makes a captivatingly refreshing white out of ribolla gialla, tocai friulano and chardonnay, as well as a chardonnay and a sauvignon blanc, which demonstrate that Napa can do crisp and lively as well as weighty and powerful. By day, Dan Petroski is the winemaker at Larkmead, a historic property that makes fine if conventional Napa Valley wines. At Massican, Mr. Petroski shows a fascinating alternative side of Napa.

Matthiasson is another example of the antithesis of Napa Valley's glamorous side. Steve and Jill Klein Matthiasson are farmers, essentially — he is a leading vineyard consultant — and their wines bear an agricultural stamp, as fresh, lively and alive as the best produce from a farmers' market, made from grapes that they either grow themselves or monitor before they purchase. Their wines are a pleasure, whether Friulian varieties blended with sémillon and sauvignon blanc, straightforward chardonnay, an unusual refosco, a shapely merlot or a mouthwateringly tangy rosé made from syrah.

I haven't even mentioned Anthill Farms or Ceritas, Los Pilaes or Petrichor Vineyards, Natural Process Alliance or Lioco. Nor should old-timers be forgotten, like Edmunds St. John and Qupé, Porter Creek and Corison, Clos Saron and Ojai, Au Bon Climat and Littorai. California is an awfully big wine-producing world. It's time to embrace it.