

The San Francisco Chronicle Wine Selections: **Sonoma County Sauvignon Blanc**

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Friday, June 20, 2008

Sometimes Sauvignon Blanc seems like the Play-Doh of California wine: It's completely malleable, and no one's sure just how to mold it. Even more than their Napa Valley counterparts, our latest panel of Sonoma County Sauvignon Blancs again left us thinking about winemaking styles. We found plenty to like, but the 14 recommended wines among 45 tasted were as different as could be. Some saw a good dose of oak barrel, some saw none. Flavors wandered from New Zealand-like doses of gooseberry to heavy tropical bass notes of mango and papaya. It's a good snapshot of vintners' continuing struggles to come to terms with Sauvignon Blanc's many guises.

The grape can be found in virtually every corner of Sonoma County - no surprise since it's a solid, quick-turning moneymaker that requires far less effort than, say, Chardonnay. Though a minimal winemaking approach, with stainless steel tanks, is often the best route, and oaked Sauvignon Blanc can quickly take a disastrous turn, we found good examples across a wide range of styles. It can be hard to think deep thoughts around Sauvignon Blanc. But in a couple cases, more serious winemaking (and steep price tags) could be evidenced, and winningly so. It may not help resolve the style mysteries, but we took it as a sign that winemakers are thinking carefully about what the grape should say.

- Jon Bonné

Rating: THREE STARS

2007 Benziger Signaterra Shone Farm Vineyard Russian River Valley (\$24) This single-vineyard effort from a parcel in Forestville, which also serves as an agricultural teaching facility for Santa Rosa Junior College, was perhaps the most serious effort we found, and the best of the tasting. Fermented with native yeast in stainless steel, it gets more than four months on the lees, which explains the richer notes and limpid, lovely finish. An unusual, Riesling-like nose, with jasmine, lanolin and mango cream to augment the zesty lemon and green notes. Yet it's sharp-eyed, with lots of high-toned citrus, like a tart bonbon.

Rating: TWO STARS

2007 Curveball Sonoma County Spinning White (\$25) Winemaker Paul Hoffman finds his tropical notes from an unusual source: 15 percent dry Gewurztraminer mixed in with the Sauvignon Blanc. A bit stark to open, with charcoal, hay and gooseberry. On the palate, it's full of energy, with rich pineapple, citrus and stone fruit. A bit weightier than some, but remains balanced and lean.

Rating: TWO STARS

2006 Dry Creek Vineyard Sonoma County Fume Blanc (\$14.50) This perennial hit never sees a lick of wood, even if its name harks back to the days when Sauvignon Blanc required oak and a synonym to sell. Clean, precise aromas sold it this time, including saline, fresh oregano, apple and creamy grapefruit. A rounded texture balances out punchy lean citrus flavors, and it has a lively core, if not as much depth as some.

Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS

2007 Fritz Estate Dry Creek Valley (\$22) Don't let geography fool you: This Cloverdale winery shows off Dry Creek's potential for expressing a cooler-climate profile, thanks in part to a relatively early harvest date of Aug. 20. Plays heavily on green flavors, but lean yuzu, gooseberry and tart candy notes offer additional impact. It's sharp and a touch hard in places, but also stylish, with a raciness and exotic profile that makes it stand out.

Rating: TWO STARS

2007 Fritz Russian River Valley (\$18) Despite the cooler influences, this additional effort from Fritz is really all about the tropics - papaya, pineapple and banana fill up the nose, amended by green herb and wet hay notes. A pomelo-skin astringency helps define a taut texture amid the oak profile.

Rating: TWO STARS

2007 Gary Farrell Redwood Ranch Sonoma County (\$25) This familiar winery is now back in the hands of a Healdsburg concern, Ascentia Wine Estates. Twenty percent of this wine is fermented in new French oak, offering a bold, if oak-driven nose, almost honeyed and Chardonnay-like in moments, with more typical clover and green pepper notes peeking through. Straightforward and a bit heavy on the palate, though the oak notes carry through and have their appeal.

Rating: TWO STARS

2007 Geyser Peak Block Collection River Ranches Russian River Valley (\$20) Geyser Peak's California-appellation Sauvignon Blanc is a popular pick, but its reserve efforts show promise,

too. There's a bit of neutral oak, but no malolactic fermentation, so the surprise was how rich, almost leesy, it was on the nose, with muddled nectarine, hay and fig amid fresh citrus. Lots of grass notes, fresh and dried, that will appeal to those who enjoy a sunny afternoon with the lawnmower. But you'd better like those aromas.

Rating: TWO STARS

2006 Handley Cellars Handley Vineyard Dry Creek Valley (\$15) Four pickings in the vineyard gave Milla Handley's 2006 a mix of ripe and herbal notes. Clean, crisp flavors of snap bean and jalapeno mix with nectarine, hay and citrus. Though almost two-thirds was fermented in barrels, there's a razor-sharp profile, with a touch of grated lemon and an astringent touch at the end.

Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS

2007 Hanna Winery Russian River Valley (\$17) From the Hanna family's mix of estate parcels, and made entirely in steel, this is a high-acid crowd-pleaser, with vibrant tones and intriguing notes of kiwi, Meyer lemon and white grape skin. Slight touches of green bean and wet hay, with pleasantly lingering acidity.

Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS

2007 Imagery Estate Wow Oui Sonoma County (\$27) From Joe Benziger's small-batch label comes this hard-hitting entry, fermented all in tanks, with a bit of Muscat Canelli added in. Full of rich lime curd and grapefruit, plus aggressive herbal notes of chive and cut grass. Lean, but dense and citrus-packed, with a pleasing focus and length.

Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS

2007 Rancho Zabaco Reserve Russian River Valley (\$18) A ripe, almost buttery, texture left one taster wondering if there was Semillon in the mix (there's 3 percent), making for a white Bordeaux-style effort using whole clusters. Opens with confectioned notes of pink grapefruit, peach, loam

and melon. To that are added layers of green apple, gooseberry, chile and citrus. A touch of heat at the end, but mineral layers and a nuanced, expressive profile make it all compelling.

Rating: TWO STARS

2007 Selby Sonoma County (\$15)

Fermented in stainless steel, this blends fruit from parcels in several Sonoma appellations. Offers up rich orange and peach amid more tart citrus, with a softer texture.

Rating: TWO STARS

2007 Sonoma Vineyards Sonoma County (\$15)

Tom Klein and his family not only own Healdsburg mainstay Rodney Strong, but also this value-minded label, whose winemaking is overseen by Rodney Strong winemaker Rick Sayre. Offers a great grassy snap on the nose, with elements of jalapeno pepper, lime and orange zest and a fresh greenness to it. Lean but grippy at the end, though a touch of heat shows.

Rating: TWO STARS

2007 Souverain Alexander Valley (\$15)

Despite the appellation, there's also 14 percent Lake County fruit in the mix here, and 7 percent Viognier. Aged in older oak barrels, it's a hit for oak lovers, with an apparent wood presence on both nose and palate. That and five months of lees contact provides a rich, waxy texture that supports notes of fresh grass, grapefruit, melon and peach.

Panelists include: Jon Bonné, Chronicle wine editor; Denise Johnson, general manager, Napa Valley Winery Exchange; Aaron Elliott, wine director, Ame restaurant.

Key: Rating: FOUR STARS Extraordinary Rating: THREE STARS Excellent Rating: TWO STARS Good