



Review Round-Up –| March 2008

JC Cellars Haley's Reserve Rockpile Vineyard Syrah 2005

This highly ripened and extravagantly oaked wine is about as big and blustery as they come, and it holds absolutely nothing back by way of richness, volume or depth. It begs the question of how much is too much, but its ongoing impressions of very deep and extracted berry-like fruit are nothing short of seductive. It has the mass to handle its obvious heat and ample tannins

94 Points

JC Cellars A La Cave California Syrah 2005

Do not be misled by its simple appellation for this plush, deeply filled Syrah is a serious wine with lots of rich spice piled atop its very deep, impressively extracted fruit. Although very ripe, it is exceptionally well-balanced, and its slight sin of finishing heat is easily forgiven in light of its immense richness.

91 Points

JC Cellars Caldwell Vineyard Syrah Napa Valley 2005

Very ripe in its basics, thick and coating in feel, and showing an atypical twist of herbaceousness in both its intense blackberry aromas and concentrated, oak-infused flavors, this big-bodied, fully expressed effort embraces the winery's opulent, outgoing style. Its considerable richness comes at the cost of evident heat at the finish.

89 Points

Matchbook Blockhouse Syrah Dunnigan Hills 2004

57% Syrah; 29% Temperanillo; 7% Malbec; 7% Petit Verdot. If different from its mate below by virtue of a slightly rounder fruit component, this modest wine shares a certain woody overlay with that wine, and it also shares its propensity for latter palate narrowness and shortfall of finish.

84 Points

Matchbook Syrah Dunnigan Hills 2004

10% Malbec; 7% Cabernet Sauvignon; 1% Temperanillo. Save a dollar-or save your money. These wines may differ a touch in construction with this one being the slightly sturdier, but that is not enough to make it better. Given the choice above, it might be best to take the latter option.

84 Points

Morgan Cote du Crow's Syrah Monterey 2006

Light but fruity with both black- and blueberries suggested in the somewhat perfumed aromas, this wine turns out to be a bit fuller in body than its fruit is big, but it more than makes up for that slight imbalance with a racy sense of vigor to that fruit. Pert at the finish, it is a wine for all but the most savory, chewy fare.

87 Points

Novy Syrah Christensen Family Vineyards Russian River Valley 2005

Another balanced, mannerly approach to Syrah is found in this blackberry-scented bottling. Its bright fruit and ripe but never pushy personality is met by glimpses of spice and dried bark in the nose and shows a distinctly firm sense of balance across the palate.

89 Points

Novy Syrah Napa Valley 2005

Its stated alcohol (15.1%) would make it as ripe as the wine that follows (15.2%), but this one, if less sweet in desiccated grape character, keeps on the table wine path with its tight structure and its admittedly obvious tannins. Still, it is noticeably Syrah in the blackberryish, slightly peppery cast to its fruit, and it will be a fine mate to seared steaks.

87 Points

Shafer Relentless Syrah Napa Valley 2004

Shafer's Relentless moves right to the head of the powerhouse class and has few peers when it comes to extravagant ripeness, flamboyant oak and wonderfully deep, remarkably insistent blackberry fruit. As is usual, it comes nowhere within sight of elegance, but its strong suit, as always, is unbridled richness, and it will bring down the house with a with a garlicky leg of lamb roast both now and for as many as ten years down the line.

92 Points

Star Lane Syrah Santa Ynez Valley 2004

From its solidly fruity, abundantly spicy aromas on through to its extracted, moderately tannic, ripe berry and pepper flavors, this nicely filled youngster is explicitly Syrah. Although it is essentially very well-structured.

89 Points

Tablas Creek Syrah Paso Robles 2005

Even allowing that young Syrahs can be fairly gruff customers, this weighty, well-extracted working is a little too tannic and tough for its own good. Chalky and crude from mid-palate on and ending with some acidic angles and edges, it will need lengthy cellaring and a fair bit of luck if it is ever to emerge from its astringent shell.

85 Points

Truchard Syrah Carneros Napa Valley 2004

Tentative fruit sits to the side of brushy spice in its nose and a hint of something not quite ripe appears in the lean and slightly underfilled flavors of this slightly stiff wine. It has a fair sense of body, but it is a bit thin at its heart and lacks the richness and depth of serious Syrah.

84 Points

Clos Pegase Merlot Mitsuko's Vineyard Carneros Napa Valley 2004

Creamy and sweet from the very first and filled with a full measure of deep and optimally ripened, black cherry fruit, the latest from Clos Pegase follows the winery penchant for very rich, full-flavored wines and yet never loses its very keen varietal bearings. It is plump and rounded in feel as only good Merlot can be.

91 Points

Fife Vineyards Merlot Reserve Spring Mountain District 2004

Ripe and dense aromas of black cherries, walnuts and awkward notes of loam suggest levels of depth and extract that are quite slow to emerge on the palate. Admittedly, the wine is full-bodied and weighty, but it falls a touch short of commendation because it never fully convinces that its very reserved underlying fruit is going to open up and ultimately justify its significant asking price.

86 Points

Gainey Merlot Santa Ynez Valley 2005

Here is a clean and uncomplicated look at Merlot that bows neither to ripeness nor excessive oak in finding its fruity way. It is medium-full bodied and properly rounded in feel with a light dollop of last-minute tannin drying its finish. There is no sense of pending complexity here, and age will not see it deeper, but it will make pleasant drinking over the next two or three years.

86 Points

Gundlach Bundschu Merlot Mountain Cuvee Rhinefarm Vineyard Sonoma Valley 2004

54% Merlot; 38% Cabernet Sauvignon; 5% Cabernet Franc; 3% Petit Verdot. The tell-tale scent of sweet herbs provides a useful note of complexity to this ripe, fleshy, full-bodied effort, and if its early palate feel is all Merlot in its rounded suppleness, the wine's latter half takes on the trappings of its Cabernets portions in the somewhat tough, drying finish.

87 Points

Shafer Vineyards Merlot Napa Valley 2005

Shafer's preoccupations with richness find perfect expression in this juicy and fruit-laden Merlot. Deep and defined and brimming with cherries and very sweet oak, this working is uncannily refined for the ripe wine that it is, and it sports a sense of sophistication that transcends its similarly big-bodied mates. It is so plump and fleshy that it can be enjoyed now.

91 Points

Trefethen Merlot Oak Knoll District Napa Valley 2004

True to the winery style, this keenly fruited bottling is both lively and balanced, and it comes with a fair bit of flesh on its bones that keeps things on the rich, supple varietal track. Black cherries join with a hint of dried herbs and a soupcon of creamy oak in the mouth, and the wine is both long and full of energy as it finishes.

90 Points

Cliff Lede Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley 2006

While ample ripeness has provided this wine with a real sense of extract and substance, there is presently a need for better-defined fruit and a little more polish before it can claim full one-star recommendation. It drifts to a bit of grapefruity stiffness at the back of the palate, yet it does not dry out.

86 Points

Clos Pegase Sauvignon Blanc Mitsuko's Vinyard Carneros Napa Valley 2006

Clean, somewhat juicy aromas of sweet melons also boast strong varietal characteristics of kiwi and gooseberry, but, while the wine's fruit-focused personality clearly favors the New Zealand model of Sauvignon Blanc, the full and somewhat fleshy feel on the palate is all California in origin. Its flavors are long and on-point and carry both the depth and balance that is needed for a few years of cellaring.

89 Points

Gainey Sauvignon Blanc Santa Ynez Valley 2006

Clean, slightly weedy, but low-keyed and looking for vitality, it tails off to back-end coarseness owing to its lack of real fruity substance.

85 Points

Gary Farrell Sauvignon Blanc Redwood Ranch Sonoma County 2006

At once both ripe and refined and showing a subtle side even if fairly full on the palate, this deceptively deep and very well-balanced Sauvignon combines elements of green peach, melons, minerals and a light touch of grass in its nicely measured display of varietal character.

88 Points

Honig Sauvignon Blanc Reserve Rutherford Napa Valley 2006

With its watery appearance and its too loose hold on varietal fruit, this stunted effort fights gamely to show off hints of grass and green melons, but, by the finish, it falls victim to chalky dryness and a slight chemical burn.

84 Points

Mason Cellars Chardonnay Napa Valley 2006

This wine is very much geared to the grassy, overtly herbal end of the varietal spectrum, and it steers to limey, citrus-like fruit far more than melons or figs. It is at once both firm and slightly fleshy in feel, and it has the fruity extract to balance its leanings to acidic crispness. A year in bottle will help smooth its evident edges, but it should make a good match to Oysters Rockefeller in the near term.

87 Points

Silverado Vineyards Sauvignon Blanc Miller Ranch Yountville Napa Valley 2006

There is a fair bit of uncomplicated, mildly melony fruit at work in this wine, yet it is blurred by a persistent cardboard fog that simply refuses to lift. It starts out with frontal flavors of candied lime and green pears, but its bitter finish makes moot all of its initial appeals.

83 Points

Sonoma Coast Vineyards Sauvignon Blanc Hummingbird Hill Vineyards Sonoma Coast 2006

Rife with pungent, matchsticky qualities and bothered by chemical heat, this pale, hard-to-like offering is at once both coarse and slightly sugary in character with far too little fruit in its favor.

82 Points

Spottswoode Estate Vineyard & Winery Sauvignon Blanc 65% Napa County 35% Sonoma County 2006

It is clean, faintly grassy and moderately fruity, but it comes in this outing with undisguised back-palate bitterness and heat that temper our enthusiasm for its positive traits. We are left hoping that a bit of patience and time in the bottle may allow it to find a more comfortable stance.

88 Points