



Review Round-Up | March 2007

6th Sense Lodi 2004

By David and Michael Phillips. We have found plenty to like in the rich and well-ripened Zins from this Lodi producer, and the same sense of plushness and sweet fruit that has marked those wines comes through again in this very juicy and wide-open Syrah. It is full on the palate and teases with touches of dark chocolate, but it does not give up to runaway ripeness and sports an admirable sense of balance from beginning to end.

88 Points

Miner Napa Valley 2003

Plentiful sweet oak spice lends a real boost in richness to the concentrated berrylike themes of this fleshy, full-bodied mélange of Rhone varietals, and, if a little too ripe in tone and never keenly defined Syrah, it has plenty of stuffing and flavor. It presently ends on a note of mildly acidic coarseness, but service with food will smooth its way as will a few more years on the cork.

88 Points

Alexander Valley Vvds Alexander Valley 2004

A thin but of cherryish fruit keeps this underfilled bottling in the varietal camp, but the roundness and plump palatal feel of fine Merlot is largely absent. While it is not particularly high in tannin, the wine is nonetheless cut short by acid-accentuated astringency.

85 Points

Darioush Napa Valley 2004

The winery hallmarks of generous oak, unabashed ripeness and high extract are fully apparent here, but it is voluptuous, keenly defined fruit that moves the wine to the head of the class. Richly appointed with ripe cherries and laced with sweet, crème brûlée qualities from first to last, it never crosses into overripeness and maintains remarkable balance given its out-and-out opulence. It invites near-term drinking, but a few years of cellaring will bring even more polish and complexity.

93 Points

Darioush Napa Valley 2003

Just dripping with opulent richness, this outgoing wine combines abundant sweet black-cherry fruitiness with a lavish layer of lovely oak. Mouthfilling in palateweight and supple in texture, it comes loaded with deep flavors of the kind that can overwhelm simple meats, this bottling needs to be served alongside savory, melt-in-your-mouth dishes like meaty short ribs or wine-braised beef cheeks over the next few years.

90 Points

Gundlach Bundschu Rhinefarm Vineyard 2004

Big, ripe, a touch blunt overall but so very deep in ripe red cherry and dried herb varietal character that simply overcomes a touch of excess, this wine is quite full and round in feel and a little on the dry side in its latter half. Withal, it is not lacking in fruit and promises to be a willing meal-time mate to well-seasoned steaks and roasts.

87 Points

HdV Red Wine Carneros Napa Valley 2003

A refined and polished Merlot, this one smells of tight, still developing red cherry fruit buttressed by very rich, creamy oak. It is fairly full and extremely well-balanced on the palate, and its opening lushness is quickly met by firming acidity towards the back. Drinking it now would certainly work out well, but this is a wine that will unfold into a lot better over the next several years.

92 Points

Shafer Napa Valley 2004

Rich, concentrated and plush with a wealth of wonderfully sweet oak surrounding its very deep, optimally ripened, black-cherryish fruit, this involving offering will never be accused of subtlety or understatement, but its compelling richness makes it one of our top picks among recently tasted Merlots. A supple, full-bodied wine whose supportive tannins in no way dissuade drinking in the near term, it has the structure, stuffing and ongoing fruit to improve for a several years yet.

91 Points

Clos Pegase Mitsuko's Vineyard Carneros 2005 Napa Valley

Do not overlook this wonderfully well-crafted and complex Sauvignon Blanc. It takes ripe melons and pears as its central themes are partners its fruit-driven focus with accents of citrus, herbs, minerals and crème brulee. Full and fairly fleshy on the palate with plenty of brightening acidity, it is long and rich in flavor and will prove to be a fine mate to salmon filets pan-grilled with butter and shallots.

90 Points

Gainey Santa Ynez Valley 2005

Sweet and obvious oak is a key player here and lends extra measure of creamy richness to both the wine's lightly herbal aromas and slightly lush, faintly honeyed, mildly melon-like flavors. A touch of oily in feel and fairly full-bodied, this one is kept alive by just enough acid and will show its best when partnered with chicken in rich sauces.

86 Points

Silverado Miller Ranch Napa Valley 2005

Defined fruit takes a back seat to grass and herbs from the very start here, and the wine very much falls into the camp of leaner "seafood Sauvignons" that emphasize cleansing crispness over richness and weight. Serve it with shellfish and look elsewhere when poultry is on the menu.

85 Points

Turnbull Oakville Napa Valley 2005

Mild and slightly grassy at first sniff, but limited in varietal content, this fairly full-bodied wine picks up a bare touch of ripeness in its aromas and flavors from a seeming kiss of sweet oak. It is similarly clean and somewhat underplayed on the palate, and it ends on the quiet side.

85 Points

Shafer Hillside Select Retrospective: 1978-1999

As much joy and satisfaction as we may find in tasting and writing our ways through the unending seasons of new California wines, it is a special treat to occasionally stop and look back at noteworthy wines from past vintages. Often these wines not only provide real pleasure in and of themselves, but they serve as signposts and food for thought about the changes and fascinating developments of the serious California wine scene over the last thirty years.

Few producers can claim as lengthy and as successful a track record as Shafer Vineyards, and we recently sat down with owner John Shafer and winemaker Elias Fernandez for an extraordinary retrospective tasting of the winery's flagship Hillside Select Cabernet Sauvignons. Without question, one of Napa Valley's most sought after labels and a perennially high achiever in the pages of CGCW, Hillside Select bottlings have won at least ***** awards in that span. These wines are drawn from specially chosen sloping south- and west-facing sites on the estate's home property in the Stags Leap District. The winery's very first wine, the 1978 Cabernet Sauvignon, was, in fact, made from grapes grown on those very hillsides, but it was only in 1983 that the proprietary title "Hillside Select" was born. From its inception, Hillside Select has been strictly limited in production and has represented the winery's best.

There were lessons aplenty to be learned in tasting through each of the Hillside Selects that have been produced, and we were struck both by the very real evolution of winery style and by the uncanny knack that each had for accurately interpreting the classic attributes of the vintage. When queried by our hosts after tasting as to our summary thoughts, we were quick to answer that in year after year they tasted exactly like they were supposed to, and those impressions are discussed in the following notes. The bottlings from the mid 1980s reflect what was then called the "food wine" style of leanness, limited ripeness and higher acids. Regarded as something of a blunder by the owner and winemaker alike, the style was abandoned by the 1990s, and, inspired by the success of the winery's initial Cabernet in 1978, a wine that was picked riper and far later than intended, the Hillside Select bottlings gradually became riper and richer with increasingly higher percentages of new oak. They are textbook examples of what California can do with very ripe but still balanced wines, and, in their best incarnations, manage to show a bit of polish to go along with their very rich and outgoing fruit. Finally, although it was not really the intent of the tasting, our look back though the years turns out to be yet another refutation of the all-too tiresome criticisms of those who aver that California wines are unbalanced and simply too ripe to hold up and improve with age. It was, ironically, the "structured" wines from the 1980s that performed worst with time. The 1978 had held up and developed marvelously and a good many of the wines at ten or more years of age were far from hitting their strides. And while we will not claim great surprise at the fact, it is nice to be reminded that old friends in the cellar will not give up their virtues anytime soon.

Hillside Select Tasting Notes:

1978 Cabernet Sauvignon

Although the designation "hillside Select" had yet to be coined by Shafer, this still lovely and intriguing bottling was in fact produced from Cabernet grown on the hillside sites that would become the source of the winery's flagship offerings. As it nears its thirtieth birthday, it is in very fine shape and shows fully-ripened currants and black cherries overlain by elements of cedar and sweet leather. Its edges have rounded, and its tannins are resolved, but it is far from toothless, and it should keep well for a number of years.

91 Points

1983 Cabernet Sauvignon

The first Hillside Select to bear the proprietary title, the 1983 bottling is cut from considerably different cloth than either its 1978 precursor or the fleshy, fruit-laden wines from the 1990s. It is firm, relatively leaner in style and framed by evident acids, but if clearly shortening and beginning to dry, it has enough left to hang on for a few years.

87 Points

1984 Cabernet Sauvignon

If picked with higher acid and at a lower pH than later efforts, this wine still shows the ripeness that marked the warm 1984 vintage. It is less refined but richer and more fully stuffed than the bottlings after and before it, and it has not let go of its basic fruit. It is a touch dry but in fine shape for a twenty-two-year wine, and it can hold up for another half-decade or more.

90 Points

1985 Cabernet Sauvignon

The Cabernets of 1985 came with high expectations and were praised by many, ourselves included, for their firmness and ageworthy structures. As it turns, too few really blossomed and too many are as rigid now as they were in their youths. This textbook 1985 wine is very much built in a tighter, arguably refined style, and while still firm at the edges, it needs to be drunk up soon.

88 Points

1986 Cabernet Sauvignon

By dint of vintage or a less-than-perfect cork, our sample from 1986 was sadly showing its age. Oddly herbal, and fairly diffuse, this overly dry and austere offering has tannins to last for many years, but it struggles to find the fruity filling it needs, and, if representative, it is a real disappointment considering the promise it showed us when young.

86 Points

1987 Cabernet Sauvignon

This comparatively polished, fully developed wine is both open and well-appointed with fruit at this point. It is upple and rounded in feel with scattered suggestions of olives, loam and tea running its length, and if fairly mature, it is in no danger of fading away soon.

91 Points

1988 Cabernet Sauvignon

The imperatives of rain, fog and cold weather made 1988 a difficult year throughout California's North Coast, but this supple, balanced, moderately fruity Cabernet has successfully grown into a much better wine than its challenging vintage predicts. It is completely mature and has found a bit of real polish with age.

88 Points

1989 Cabernet Sauvignon

At this stage of its life, this cedary, slightly herbal, tea-scented wine is showing a touch thin and threadbare and is letting go of its limited fruit. It never was a big or powerful wine, however, and it performs slightly ahead of the curve for the vintage. Its intriguing forest-floor complexities compensate in part for its present shortfall of fruit, and the time for its drinking has clearly come.

87 Points

1990 Cabernet Sauvignon

Very ripe and sweetly oaked, yet a bit dry at its heart and held back by its slight shortfall of fruit, this bottling exhibits plenty of weight on the palate without finding the stuffing to be wholly complete. It is still framed by plenty of tannin but has begun to fade all the same, and, we would opt for drinking it up quickly.

86 Points

1991 Cabernet Sauvignon

We liked this wine when first released some dozen years back, and we like it even more now. While it still shows a trace of herbaceousness, it is simply loaded with deep, well-extracted fruit and rich oak, and it is every inch Cabernet in terms of its solid structure. If anything, it still needs some years in the cellar, and we can see it improving for another decade or more.

93 Points

1992 Cabernet Sauvignon

Dense and somewhat backwards with a hesitant sense of slightly unevolved fruit in the nose, this ripe, fairly firm, tannin-laced wine draws back a bit from the more opulent styles of its immediate mates. It has plenty of body and weight and hints at a bit of suppleness as it crosses the palate, but its slight finishing dryness argues against extended keeping.

90 Points

1993 Cabernet Sauvignon

From the first of two outstanding back-to-back vintages for Shafer, this intense, positively flamboyant wine is at once both wonderfully deep and extracted yet is surprisingly polished in feel. It shows the top notes of milk chocolate that characterize later Hillside Select bottlings and has an impression of fatness that only full ripeness can bring. Firmed by a fine spine of tannins, it is rounding into shape beautifully right now yet should hold up quite well over the next eight to ten years.

95 Points

1994 Cabernet Sauvignon

This deeply drafted, optimally ripened wine won enthusiastic recommendation when first released, and it remains our favorite Hillside Select of the 1990s. It has developed layer upon layer of real varietal complexity, and its broad sweep of sweet oak only serves to enrich its wealth of juicy, curranty fruit. It is a big, very rich, uncommonly well-proportioned wine whose integral tannins assure another ten years or more of peak drinkability.

96 Points

1995 Cabernet Sauvignon

The 1995 bottling veers away from typical Hillside Select richness and flamboyance and comes up fairly hard to stiff on the palate. But for a bit of finishing dryness, it displays few of the aspects of age, but we do not find the juicy heart here to balance its very prominent tannins, or to encourage the lengthy cellaring that the wine requires.

88 Points

1996 Cabernet Sauvignon

Back on track after its relatively austere showing the year prior, Hillside Select rebounds in 1996 with one of its richest, most succulent renditions to date. Currants, black cherries and sweet oak abound still, and the wine does a fine balancing act between being slightly supple and polished and still having an appropriate backbone of varietal tannins. It outdoes the vintage in terms of its richness and range and sheer wealth of fruit, and it has the right pieces in all the right places to grow for a good many years.

95 Points

1997 Cabernet Sauvignon

A bit of dusty spice tags this one as just a wee bit different in the nose, but the wine's deep, currently fruit, accents of milk chocolate and close-to-plush feel are very much the stuff of its winemaker and provenance. While never abrasive, this year's version comes with an extra measure of fine-grained structural tannins, and the wine will benefit from be buried in the back of the cellar for at least another five years.

93 Points

1998 Cabernet Sauvignon

While never wanting for the intensity or sheer volume, this very big-bodied, massively extracted wine is now showing its ripeness and lacks the polish displayed by the very best of its kin. It is loaded with chocolate and crème caramel oakiness, but it is a bit coarse at the edges and lets palpable heat come through at the end. It is still a very good wine and one that will develop for ten years or more, but it will find favor most with collectors who like their Cabernets big and dramatic.

92 Points

1999 Cabernet Sauvignon

Another very bold and impressively concentrated effort, the 1999 bottling is a broad, many faceted Cabernet whose ample ripeness and generous appointment of rich oak are always complementary themes to its deep, vital, very well-focused fruit. It is still a young wine with a very long lifeline, yet, even now, it has bloomed into a ** beauty that will tempt present drinking.

94 Points