

Wine Spectator

1975 California Cabernet Retrospective: The Past Still Lives

Amid an aging class of wines, a couple of stars

James Laube

Posted: June 16, 2005



For the past 25 years, senior editor James Laube has been reviewing and writing about California Cabernets. Each year, he conducts blind retrospective tastings of older vintages. This year, he tasted wines from 1995, 1985 and 1975. It's a way, Laube says, to examine how California wines age and recommend when the wines are at their peak. It's also fun, he says, to find the surprises—good and otherwise—that come with cellaring wines.

Tasting 30-year-old Cabernets is a bit like going to a high-school reunion.

You're happy to still be alive. Beforehand, you wonder how your classmates are aging. Inevitably, you discover that some have matured gracefully while others are looking woefully out of shape, and worse, some unfortunate souls are already dead and gone.

Recently, I blind-tasted 16 California Cabernet Sauvignons from 1975. The line-up offered a couple of treats and a few disappointments, as well as insights into how this wine (and blends thereof) has evolved in the last three decades.

The 1975 vintage was considered a solid year when it was released in the late 1970s. But it came in the shadow of a watershed vintage, 1974, and received less attention than it deserved.

The star of my tasting was the Mount Eden Saratoga (92 points on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale), an estate-grown wine from a vineyard that lies in the Santa Cruz Mountains area south of San Francisco. Only 391 cases were produced, and it sold for \$14 on release. The Mount Eden is still amazingly youthful, vibrant and richly flavored. The fruit is ripe and sweet, and the tannins are plush and fleshy.

The last time I tried the 1975 Mount Eden was in 1988, when researching a book on California Cabernet. At that time, I rated it 91, with a note that it was "extremely intense and still quite tannic." The drink window called for consumption between 1995 and 2005. But based on my most recent tasting, it could easily go another 10 to 20 years.

The runner-up, Heitz Martha's Vineyard (90), showed classic Martha's character. It remains elegantly styled, with graceful currant, mint, bay leaf and cedary cigar box nuances.

Four wines that I thought were excellent for the vintage included the Robert Mondavi Reserve (88), Cuvaision Napa Valley (87), Caymus Special Selection (85) and Joseph Phelps Insignia (85). While the 1975 Caymus Special Selection (the winery's first bottling of this reserve cuvée) was 100 percent Cabernet and spent nearly four years in oak, it's still very pleasant. The Mondavi shows the exquisite balance and graceful style that marked the winery's bottlings in that era.

The Insignia is notably complex, too. Phelps was one of the first wineries to tinker with its Cabernet and Merlot blends each year, and this vintage was 86 percent Merlot. In this instance, winemaker Walter Schug preferred what Merlot had to offer, so it dominated the cuvée. The Insignia showed better than the Phelps Eisele Vineyard bottling (81), which is fading, with a glimmer of dried currant and tobacco.

Diamond Creek's two Cabernets reflected the reality that as wines get older, it comes down to whether you get a good bottle or one that's just OK. The Red Rock Terrace (84) tasted much livelier than the Volcanic Hill (70), which was dry and likely a victim of a weak cork, giving it an oxidized edge; it was far less compelling than usual for this wine.

The two bottles of Ridge Monte Bello (the best at 79 points) didn't show well, but thanks to Paul Draper's footnote on the back label, it's worth noting that this wine had all of 11.8 percent alcohol. I don't think anyone makes wines with this level of alcohol anymore. More typically, Napa Valley Cabernet hovers in the 14 percent to 15 percent range. How times have changed.