

STYLE ² AND SUBSTANCE



Desparada's Vaillia From is at the forefront of a young generation of innovative vintners who are raising the bar for Sauvignon Blanc.

California winemakers are taking Sauvignon Blanc in new directions, yielding complex and expressive whites

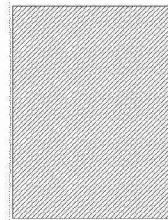
BY MARYANN WOROBIEC

The work of elevating a wine starts in the vineyard, and Sauvignon Blanc is no exception. The variety is seeing a surge of interest in California, as vintners look to drive up quality by locking into sites that have a reputation for exceptional grapes. The result is that site-specific expressions are on the rise, a trend that dovetails with greater experimentation in the cellar, where winemakers are making more sophisticated choices.

Across the Golden State, there's a new enthusiasm for this white grape, as producers and consumers alike are recognizing its value and versatility. "I've learned to respect Sauvignon Blanc as one of the two great white wines of the world," says Merry Edwards, one of the first winemakers to succeed with the variety in California. Her Sauvignon Blanc Russian River Valley 2007 (96 points), a ripe, vibrant and mouthwatering white, was No. 9 on *Wine Spectator's* Top 100 Wines of 2009.

When Edwards started making Sauvignon Blanc in 2001, mature grapevines were being ripped out and planted to the more popular Chardonnay. "My phone rang off the hook with calls from growers trying to sell their Sauvignon Blanc grapes," she says. Now the tide has turned. Edwards reports that there is no longer any excess Sauvignon Blanc during harvest, and her Russian River Valley bottling is a perennial example of what the grape is capable of in California. The 2016 (93, \$36) is among this report's top-scorers.

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As I noted in last year's report ("Fresh Perspective," May 31, 2017), California winemakers are employing an arsenal of techniques that previously had been used only with Chardonnay or red wine, including wild-yeast fermentation, whole-cluster press and additional lees contact. They are also experimenting with different types of vessels—to coax more texture and flavor from their wines—as well as different clones, such as Sauvignon Musqué, which has a reputation for spice and floral accents, and Sauvignon Gris, known for a richness of body.

Since that report, I have reviewed nearly 200 Sauvignon Blancs in blind tastings at our Napa office, primarily from the 2016 vintage. More than 40 of them received outstanding scores of 90 points or higher on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale and another 65 rated 88 or 89 points, a level of quality matched by the impressive value on display, with dozens of these bottlings at \$25 or less. (A free alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available at www.winespectator.com/061518.)

Many of the best wines from recent vintages are either single-vineyard or block-specific bottlings. It's a welcome change, says Brandon Sparks-Gillis of Dragonette Cellars in Santa Barbara, whose three annual releases of Happy Canyon Sauvignon Blanc include two vineyard-designated bottlings, from Vogelzang Vineyard and Grassini Family Vineyard.

"Our customers often express surprise that our two single-vineyard offerings show such individual personalities," says Sparks-Gillis. "While single-vineyard expressions—or *terroir* in general—aren't anything new for varieties like Chardonnay or Pinot Noir, people do seem genuinely surprised and excited that California Sauvignon Blanc can show site."

Part of the appeal of specific sites is their maturing vines. Matt Duffy of Vaughn Duffy points out that the yields from older vines are self-limiting. Their deeper roots don't require much irrigation and produce more consistent grapes from vintage to vintage. "Older vineyards are there for a reason," Duffy says. "They've made great wines for years." His Sauvignon Blanc Russian River Valley Hopkins River Ranch 2016 (92, \$24) is the perfect example, a focused and refreshing white that offers distinctive flavors and vivid acidity.

Sauvignon Blanc lends itself to large crops, so it's important to keep yields down in the vineyard. Winemaker Jesse Katz, who makes outstanding Sauvignon Blancs for Aesthete Wines and his own Aperture Cellars, explains his new approach: "We are also dialing in the vineyard protocol with a new focus on crop load—much of the stuff we have been doing for our reds for many years. But we are seeing this effect in the whites as well, making them richer and concentrated to complement what we are doing in the winery." The Aesthete Sauvignon Blanc Bennett Valley Dry Stack Vineyard 2016 (92, \$55) is rich, juicy and complex, while the Aperture Sauvignon Blanc Sonoma County 2016 (92, \$35) is ripe, sleek and detailed.

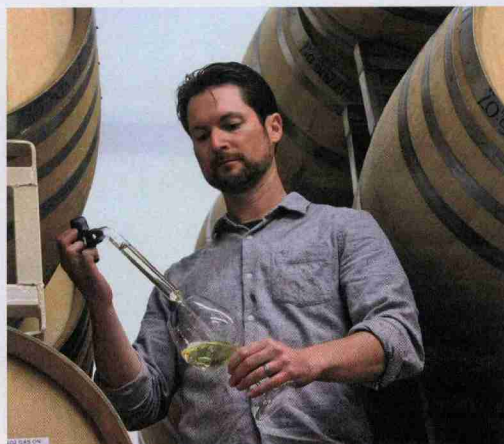
Yet for some producers, the high demand for California Sauvignon Blanc means moving away from single-vineyard or even single-appellation wines to widen their grape sources. Honig's popular Sauvignon Blanc bottling, which overdelivers on quality at less than \$20 a bottle, will look different beginning with the 2017 vintage. Previously designated as Napa Valley, the wine will now blend in grapes from neighboring regions Lake and Solano counties, and the label will list all three.



A pioneer among California's Sauvignon Blanc producers, Merry Edwards continues to make outstanding versions from her vineyards in Russian River Valley.

The new label could hold a more generic "North Coast" or "California" designation, but, explains Stephanie Honig, "Since *terroir* is so relevant in the world of wine, we felt that this would better represent where it's from." The blend will continue to be predominately Napa, Honig says, but she doesn't think the switch will drive away customers. "Do people identify Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc as they do Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon?" she asks. "I don't think so."

Meanwhile, in the cellar, winemakers are using techniques that were atypical for the production of California Sauvignon Blanc



At his Vaughn Duffy winery, Matt Duffy produces distinctive Sauvignon Blancs through innovative winemaking methods and a reliance on older vines.

TOP: BEN MILLER

until recently, including more expensive and time-consuming applications such as barrel fermentation, pre-press maceration and lees stirring. "It's pretty amazing how the same grape can create Marlborough's zippy aromatic style and Dagueneau's tightly coiled, layered barrel expressions," Duffy says. "Even within California, the range seems to be expanding as producers refine their styles." But Duffy also points out that this shouldn't confuse customers looking for consistency. "Most of the time, you still know it's Sauvignon Blanc," he adds.

That means wine lovers can continue to expect Sauvignon Blanc's vibrant acidity and telltale citrus notes that can veer toward stone or tropical fruits. Many of the best examples also have a satisfying fleshy texture. After years of simply preserving Sauvignon Blanc's fresh, fruity tendencies, winemakers are leaning into other styles. "Oftentimes with Sauvignon Blanc the personality of the varietal can take over the personality of the wine itself, making it too varietal, a little déjà vu," says Simon Faury of Merryvale, who is one of the California winemakers employing techniques from Bordeaux. After a quick maceration, the juice is pressed into large barrels, with the use of new oak limited to about 10 percent.

Many winemakers who experiment with barrel fermentation point out that the technique gives these naturally high-acid wines more structure. Katz was inspired by what he saw at Haut-Brion a few years ago. "Tasting barrel by barrel, I kept going back to a barrel that had a unique profile that I was not used to," he says. "I enjoyed the spice and complexity it added." It was a French oak barrel with a toasted acacia barrel head. He decided to incorporate this type of barrel into some of his California projects.

Katz isn't alone in using acacia in his Sauvignon Blanc program. Some producers who are trying it feel that the acacia adds a floral note to their wines, while others claim it's a way to get the desired texture without the typical toast and vanilla of oak.

Desparada's Vailia From, who made four outstanding wines in this report, is having success with clay amphorae, in which she ferments whole berries. The thick walls steady the temperature during fermentation. "Wine is just fermentation, right?" From says. "But there are so many ways to set yourself apart as a producer." For From, that includes the use of native yeast. "Inoculated wines go faster and at higher temperatures. I prefer to go low and slow. Why try to control fermentation? I know it's going to ferment."

Standard stainless-steel tanks remain a popular way to preserve Sauvignon Blanc's purity of fruit and aromatics, yet California vintners are even looking differently at stainless. Justin Seidenfeld at Rodney Strong is innovating with the largest square stainless-steel tank-fermentation cellar in the world, aiming both to fill the winery's space efficiently and to allow the wine's cap to rise easily. The high polish of the 6,000-gallon tanks reduces water usage by nearly 65 percent, since they are much easier to clean, and Seidenfeld

believes that they result in rounder, softer, denser wines. The Rodney Strong Sauvignon Blanc Northern Sonoma Charlotte's Home 2016 (89, \$17) certainly offers plenty of style, with fresh, smooth flavors that end with a succulent finish.

Beyond vessel experimentation, vintners are exploring other methods for making Sauvignon Blanc. Exposure to grape skins is another relatively new technique to increase aromatics. "I continue to flirt with short-term skin contact when skins are ripe as a way to add perfume and a touch of fleshiness," says Sterling winemaker Harry Hansen. "While a little herbal character is varietal, I prefer to wait it out to get my veggies elsewhere."



The tasting room at Honig in Rutherford is a destination for those searching out expressive and elegant Sauvignon Blanc. Honig produces both a regional blend and a reserve bottling made from estate-grown fruit.

Bibiana González Rave of Cattleja is one of an increasing number of winemakers who bottles their wines unfiltered and unfiltered. "If you filter, you lose aromatics, you lose texture," she says. "It's the risk of another operation that exposes the wine to oxygen." When wines are unfiltered, she adds, "People really love it. They'll say, 'I'm tasting the way you taste it in the barrel!' There's a purity."

Winemakers are happy that their craft with Sauvignon Blanc doesn't need age for the wines to show well. "Our Sauvignon Blanc is one of the most consistent wines that we make," says Duffy. He points to the fact that the variety is one of the first picked each harvest, avoiding late-season weather drama. Picking Sauvignon Blanc earlier in the season helps preserve its natural acidity.

It doesn't hurt that this acidity makes Sauvignon Blanc an excellent match for food, or that our current cocktail culture might make the grape's bright aromatics even more appealing, as González Rave suggests. The good news for thirsty wine lovers is that the golden age of California Sauvignon Blanc doesn't appear to be fading any time soon. Winemakers like From have seen the progress firsthand: "I feel like from when I first started selling Sauvignon Blanc in 2010 versus now, it's much more widely accepted that it can be a quality wine, not just a cheap white to drink at a restaurant."

Senior editor MaryAnn Worobiec is Wine Spectator's lead taster on California Sauvignon Blanc.

MaryAnn Worobiec's Recommended California Sauvignon Blancs

Nearly 200 wines were reviewed for this report. A free alphabetical list is available at www.winespectator.com/061518.
 WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

WINE	SCORE	PRICE	WINE	SCORE	PRICE
MERRY EDWARDS Sauvignon Blanc Russian River Valley 2016 Succulent and juicy, this white offers fresh pineapple, marmalade, Key lime and papaya flavors that sing with purity and focus.	93	\$36	94574 Sauvignon Blanc Rutherford 2015 Lip-smacking lemon verbena, lime sherbet and melon flavors are intense and refreshing, with nice concentration and focus.	91	\$19
ROBERT MONDAVI Fumé Blanc Napa Valley To Kalon Vineyard Reserve 2015 Expressive and complex, featuring an explosion of marmalade, candied lemon peel, peach custard and grilled grapefruit flavors.	93	\$52	ACCENDO Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley 2015 Firm and vibrant, offering a mouthwatering mix of Key lime, lemon and green apple flavors that mingle with a hint of minerality.	90	\$60
AESTHETE Sauvignon Blanc Bennett Valley Dry Stack Vineyard 2016 Shows tremendous presence, offering vanilla custard, honeysuckle and peach marmalade flavors that are rich and juicy.	92	\$55	CATTELEYA Sauvignon Blanc Sonoma County Alma de Cattleya 2016 Distinctive, with a whiff of lanolin and coconut water to the crisp core of citrus flavors. Supple and juicy.	90	\$24
APERTURE Sauvignon Blanc Sonoma County 2016 Sleek and detailed, with ripe pear, passion fruit and lemongrass flavors that are vibrant and aromatic, with a juicy, elegant body.	92	\$35	CLIF FAMILY Sauvignon Blanc Oak Knoll District of Napa Valley 2016 A whiff of smoke and lanolin and a honeysuckle aroma add richness and depth to the core of succulent peach and marmalade flavors.	90	\$38
DESPARADA Sauvignon Blanc Happy Canyon of Santa Barbara Amphora McGinley Vineyard 2016 Distinctive and fragrant, featuring a core of ruby grapefruit and green apple flavors, with spice and floral details.	92	\$34	HEITZ Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley 2016 Elegant and transparent, offering crisp Fuji apple, nectarine and pear flavors, with bright acidity and a juicy finish.	90	\$22
DESPARADA Sauvignon Blanc Santa Maria Valley Presqu'île Vineyard 2016 Intensely fragrant and juicy, offering fleshy blood orange, makrut lime, Key lime pie, marmalade and lemon curd notes.	92	\$34	LAIL Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley Blueprint 2016 This vivid white veers toward tropical flavors of mango, dried pineapple and melon, with vibrant, mouthwatering acidity.	90	\$40
FAVIA Sauvignon Blanc Coombsville Linea 2016 A complex and succulent white, with fleshy pear, white peach and honeysuckle notes. Crisp acidity keeps everything fresh and focused.	92	\$85	MASON Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley 2016 Clean, smooth and crisp, offering a lip-smacking mix of pear, melon and Key lime flavors, with plenty of intensity on the finish.	90	\$19
GRASSINI Sauvignon Blanc Happy Canyon of Santa Barbara Reserve 2015 Lush and generous, oozing with peach, marmalade and strawberry flavors. Shows plenty of intensity, with a mouthwatering finish.	92	\$45	PROVENANCE Sauvignon Blanc Rutherford 2016 Lemon, peach and pear flavors are fresh and vibrant on a supple body, with spice, green tea and dried floral accents.	90	\$25
PETER MICHAEL Sauvignon Blanc Knights Valley L'Après-Midi 2015 Rich and succulent, with honeycomb, honeysuckle and buttered brioche notes to the core of dried apricot and peach cobbler.	92	\$58	QUINTESSA Sauvignon Blanc Napa-Sonoma Counties Illumination 2016 Succulent and fragrant, offering orange blossom, green tea, peach, Meyer lemon and nectarine flavors on a supple body.	90	\$55
QUIVIRA Sauvignon Blanc Dry Creek Valley Refuge 2015 Supple and nicely juicy, offering a mix of white grapefruit, yellow apple and Meyer lemon flavors that are light and refreshing.	92	\$30	SIDEBAR Sauvignon Blanc Russian River Valley Ritchie Vineyard 2016 Offers lemon-lime flavors at the core, with green papaya and fresh ginger notes. Crisp acidity keeps everything in focus.	90	\$34
VAUGHN DUFFY Sauvignon Blanc Russian River Valley Hopkins River Ranch 2016 Perfumed, with honeysuckle and lime zest notes and vivid acidity, showing flavors of orange sherbet, dried mango and peach.	92	\$24	GIRARD Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley 2016 Lemon-lime flavors branch out into lip-smacking notes of Key lime pie, papaya and orange zest in this intense, harmonious white.	89	\$18
COUP DE Foudre Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley 2016 Strikes the right balance between rich toasted herb, coconut water, citrus and marmalade notes and vibrant, mouthwatering acidity.	91	\$75	JOEL GOTT Sauvignon Blanc California 2016 A silky and elegant version, with crisp Key lime, Meyer lemon and fresh herbal shadings on a light, refreshing body.	89	\$14
GAMBLE FAMILY Sauvignon Blanc Yountville Gamble Vineyard 2016 Rich and succulent, offering flavors of coconut water, mango, honeysuckle and saline, yet with an air of elegance and lightness.	91	\$25	PEDRONCELLI Sauvignon Blanc Dry Creek Valley East Side Vineyards 2016 This vivid white features lemon-lime flavors, with whiffs of peach blossom and lemon verbena adding aromatic intensity.	89	\$15
GREEN & RED Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley Catacula Vineyard 2015 Supple, rich and expressive, with succulent apricot, lemon curd and ripe peach flavors, kept lively by crisp acidity.	91	\$22	DANCING BULL Sauvignon Blanc California Winemaker's Reserve 2016 This has a striking presence of lemongrass and ginger to complement the crisp, mouthwatering core of lemon and ruby grapefruit.	88	\$12
MURRIETA'S WELL The Whip Livermore Valley 2015 Fragrant, with peach blossom and baked apple notes that lead to crisp, juicy citrus and apple flavors. Sauvignon Blanc blend.	91	\$24	FOPPIANO Sauvignon Blanc Russian River Valley 2016 Fleshy melon and peach notes have an aromatic, floral side, with chamomile and peppery white flower accents on the crisp finish.	88	\$15
			MURPHY-GOODE Sauvignon Blanc North Coast The Fumé 2016 Offers a crisp, clean mix of lemon, lime, grapefruit and orange zest flavors on a smooth and juicy body, with a hint of green tea.	88	\$14