

Winery Library Turns Back Clock to '69 Freemark Abbey tasting sheds light on shifts in winemaking

By Jessica Yadegaran
Bay Area News Group
Nov. 4, 2009

TASTING AN OLD WINE can be a window into history, whether it hints at a region's changing climate or a shift in popular winemaking style. This was the premise of a Freemark Abbey retrospective tasting held last month at San Francisco's Boulevard Restaurant. Vintages vary, but Freemark Abbey offers similar library tastings in its tasting room, which is open to the public.

The Napa Valley winery dates back to 1886 and has one of the largest and oldest wine libraries in the area. Sampled alongside winemaking director Ted Edwards -- who has known the property, its soil and fruit for 30 years -- it can be illuminating to taste these classics cloaked in glass.

The goal of the winery's original partners, according to Edwards, was to make ultra-premium table wines that rivaled those of the French. Overseas experts noticed. When Paris-based British wine merchant Steven Spurrier visited Napa Valley to collect wines for the Judgment of Paris, a 1976 blind tasting of wines from France and California, he was so impressed with the wines of Freemark Abbey that it was the only winery from which he brought home two bottles, a 1972 chardonnay and a 1969 cabernet sauvignon, says George Taber, author of the "Judgment of Paris" (Scribner).

Neither won the competition (a 1973 Stag's Leap Cabernet Sauvignon and a 1973 Château Montelena Chardonnay did). Still, the 1969 Cabernet Sauvignon was extraordinary enough to lead the recent retrospective tasting -- I was mesmerized upon first sniff -- followed by two wines from 1987 and another set from the 1995 vintage. Edwards and his team went through every wine dating back to 1967. They selected these vintages because they all had something to offer, he says.

"The 1969 was the famous wine," he explains. "The '87s showed how our wines age in a vintage that is not considered one of the better years (by the press)." Edwards says he chose the 1995 wines because they are personal favorites. "I thought they had a lot of bright fruit and the finishes were smooth and fruitful," he says.

But back to that 1969. Wines like that stay with you. Composed of 88 percent cabernet sauvignon and 12 percent merlot, the center was brick red and the rim was the color of honey. There was not a trace of sediment and the aroma was distinctive: chocolate mint. Of the palate, Edwards says he was "amazed that it still had something to offer."

Indeed, there was no mistaking the complexity of the wine, with its dried cranberry and mint flavors and its long, clean finish. All of us in the room agreed that the wine hints at a

different style, even era, of California winemaking. With its 12.7 percent alcohol and dominant non-fruit characteristics, it could have passed for a Bordeaux.

To compare, the wine's baby sister, the 2007 Freemark Abbey Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon, has 14.8 percent alcohol and was made from grapes picked at 25.5 Brix. Brix is a measurement of the sugar to water ratio in a liquid. In winemaking, sugars convert to alcohol during fermentation. The grapes for the 1969 wine were picked at 21.2 Brix.

"Back then, they were interested in ripening as something to experiment with," Edwards says. "In today's world, we're looking for great maturity. We want to have a long hang time (for the vines) to achieve flavor development."

Here's a peek at the other wines in last month's tasting:

- 1987 Cabernet Bosche: Dark ruby with aromas of green olive and flavors of cherry tart. Shows age in softness and tamed tannins. Brix: 23.2. Alcohol: 12.8.
- 1987 Sycamore Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon: Dark plum with a clear rim. Aromas and flavors of black fruit and cedar with medium tannins and a long finish. Brix: 23.8. Alcohol: 12.8.
- 1995 Cabernet Bosche: Big fruit flavors of boysenberry and aromas of oak and alcohol. Hints at shift in popular fruit-forward winemaking style. Brix: 23.8. Alcohol: 13.8.
- 1995 Sycamore Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon: Intensely dark with big tannins and aromas and flavors of oak, spice, vanilla, and cherry. Brix: 23.8 Alcohol: 13.8.