

WEEKLY TASTING REPORT (DEC 14-20): 2 PERFECT 100-POINT WINES LEAD 447 RATINGS

Wednesday, December 23, 2020



The Billecart-Salmon Champagne Le Clos St.-Hilaire Brut 2003 was the highlight from this range, which James said is mind-blowing.



Aubert makes arguably the best Chardonnay in America now and the Aubert Chardonnay Sonoma County Sonoma Coast Lauren Estate 2018 is the first white wine from the USA to receive 100 points.

It's that time of year when Champagne is either in your hand or on your mind and this week we have a rare 100-pointer from Billecart-Salmon with just 1000 bottles made. The [Billecart-Salmon Champagne Le Clos St.-Hilaire Brut 2003](#) hails from an extraordinary Champagne vintage in which only the best houses managed to find this kind of quality. Made from 100 percent pinot noir, this is where the opportunity was found and the one-hectare plot delivered a style that is totally unique. "It's sort of a beast!" says James. A rare beast at that! We also rated the 2018 Aubert chardonnays this week and one Aubert wine shares line honors with the Billecart for a perfect 100-point score. The [Aubert Chardonnay Sonoma County Sonoma Coast Lauren Estate 2018](#) is the first white wine from the USA to receive a coveted 100-point rating here at JamesSuckling.com and it makes a statement for the whole category of USA chardonnay that USA chardonnays are right among the best in the world.

California dominated the tastings this week from Hong Kong with James and his team accounting for most of the ratings which reached almost 450 wines this week.

James recently caught up with Mark Aubert online and they discussed this flagship wine's unique weight and impact over Zoom. It is sourced from Aubert's oldest vines (and named after Mark Aubert's daughter). "It just builds and is very different to the others," says James, a feature that is really down to a combination of vine age and a unique site, says Aubert. "What's amazing is the location," he says, "it is on this little hill and the sunrise, the sunset, the winds – these all play a really important role in its ripeness."



James had a fantastic and insightful tasting with Mark Aubert who makes arguably the best Chardonnay in America now.



James tastes the Aubert Chardonnay Napa Valley Sugar Shack Estate Vineyard 2018 with Mark over Zoom. James gave it 99 points.

The [Aubert Chardonnay Napa Valley Carneros Hudson Vineyard 2018](#) (99 points) is the second oldest parcel of vines and asserts itself in our ratings hierarchy to reflect that. Vine age is so important to chardonnay quality. This has a striking personality and asserts the influence of the volcanic soils at Hudson and also highlights the overall ability of Aubert to deliver high alcohol chardonnays of around 15% and yet retain freshness across many wines.

The Hudson Vineyard Chardonnay 2018 has a flinty edge, holds a reductive posture and intense acid drive through the finish. It joins the [Aubert Chardonnay Napa Valley Sugar Shack Estate Vineyard 2018](#) on 99 points which James described as “dense and agile” with a really flavorful finish in the review we published a fortnight ago. “Sugar Shack is still my favorite,” says Aubert, “because we just put so much work into that wine.” “The genetics of Montrachet drive Sugar Shack,” Aubert explains. “This clone we have has been in California since the 1980’s and it is just so versatile. We have it in many vineyards.” It is a suitcase clone that was brought to the US and has been propagated by a number of people over the past 30-odd years.

Delving deeper into the 2018 vintage, Aubert explains that the major influence was the relief from the aggregated drought conditions. “We went through three or four rough vintages,” he says, “but then we had good rain going into the 2018 vintage and the vines really balanced. They had a lot of horsepower.” He explains that the vines naturally wanted to produce intensely flavoured grapes and that concentration is a hallmark of the 2018 vintage.

“It was a big harvest,” he adds, “we made 20 percent more wine than we did in 2017 but I have made some of my best wines in years with these sorts of yields. We know what to do and we can throttle the vines down.”

The nearby [Aubert Chardonnay Napa Valley Carneros Larry Hyde & Sons Vineyard 2018](#) (rated 97 points) is a very different style to the Hudson and is driven by an intense ginger and lime-curd character with smoky notes and a creamy, full-bodied texture. “We call Carneros the Chablis of our repertoire,” says Aubert, “it is very cold down there.”

Aubert explains that their approach to chardonnay winemaking is very reductive. They protect the juice, they keep barrels topped, there is no lees stirring and they use natural fermentation. “We like nature to take care of the wine and we want the wine to protect itself,” he explains, adding that they bottle with lower sulphur and find natural protection in the wines at higher alcohols due to higher natural glutathione levels. Glutathione is found in high levels in ripe chardonnay creating a natural barrier to oxidation as the wines are aged in bottle.

The discussion of reduction is an interesting point for Aubert as he sees two very different kinds of reduction in chardonnay and is emphatic about the role reduction can play. This is highly topical among lovers of great chardonnay. “I don’t want the reduction to overshadow the work we do in the vineyard and the winery. There’s a difference between terroir-derived reduction and winemaker-derived reduction,” he explains.

The Sonoma chardonnays of Aubert performed extremely well in this week’s tasting and they are clustered around the top of the ratings. “I actually think the 2018 Sonomas are stronger than the 2018 Napas,” Aubert says. The [Aubert Chardonnay Sonoma County Russian River Valley Eastside Vineyard 2018](#) (98 points) is powerful, tight and compact and one of the most complex chardonnays Aubert makes. The rocky soil here devigorates the vines naturally and drives intensity in this wine.

The [Aubert Chardonnay Sonoma County Sonoma Coast CIX Estate 2018](#) and [Aubert Chardonnay Sonoma County Russian River Valley Eastside Vineyard 2018](#) both also rated 98 points. The [Aubert Chardonnay Sonoma County Sonoma Coast UV-SL 2018](#) (97 points) has intensity and weight with a bone dry finish and the [Aubert Chardonnay Sonoma County Powder House Estate 2018](#) (96 points) is a newer estate vineyard that delivers a similar stony citrus style seen in Eastside Vineyard.

The other wine I have singled out this week is the [Shafer Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Stags Leap District Hillside Select 2017](#) (98 points). “One of the finest Hillside Selects I have had,” James says, this is on a par with 2015 and 2016 making a trifecta of exceptional releases. This wine is always so impressive for the way it delivers intensity and depth with such balance and poise.

The consistency of Shafer Hillside Select is so impressive and it has performed so well in many tastings that James and I have participated in, poured blind alongside other famous Napa cabernets and top Bordeaux. This consistency is reflective of the vineyard and site-driven DNA of the Stags Leap District and the way Shafer reshaped the site and set the project up. There are 14 small vineyard blocks, all planted to cabernet sauvignon on very poor soils amid a rugged, arid environment. Cabernet just works so well here. Production is around 2400 cases.

Enjoy this week’s reviews and stay safe.

– Nick Stock, executive editor

ACUMEN WINE CABERNET SAUVIGNON NAPA VALLEY ATLAS PEAK PEAK EDCORA VINEYARD 2018 ^

Country United States
Region California
Vintage 2018

Score
91

Stewed blackberry, clove, pine cone and grilled pepper on the nose. It's medium-bodied with firm, fine tannins. Juicy finish. Drink from 2021.

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ACUMEN WINE CABERNET SAUVIGNON NAPA VALLEY ATLAS PEAK PEAK 2018 ^

Country United States
Region California
Vintage 2018

Score
90

Fresh aromas of blackcurrant, blackberry leaf and licorice with a hint of seashell. It's medium-bodied with firm, chewy tannins. Gently leafy. Try from 2021.

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ACUMEN WINE CABERNET SAUVIGNON NAPA VALLEY ATLAS PEAK PEAK ATTELAS VINEYARD 2018 ^

Country United States
Region California
Vintage 2018

Score
90

Blackberry jam, soil, chopped basil and fresh herbs on the nose. It's medium-bodied with firm, fine-grained tannins. Fresh flavors with a chewy, herbal character. Try from 2021.

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