

JEB DUNNUCK



Napa Valley's 2018s

by JEB DUNNUCK | JANUARY 28, 2021

This report focuses on the 2018s from Napa Valley but also includes several late-release 2017s and 2019s from barrel. In addition, there is always considerable overlap in the Napa report with other regions. Napa producers tend to make wines from Sonoma and other nearby areas, and I'm happy to include them when I can. There are a handful of wines from Sonoma, Santa Lucia Highlands, Sierra Foothills, Central Coast, and a few other California regions included in this report.

As always, I approach regional reports with the singular goal of helping you, the subscriber, understand the quality and style of the vintage, so you know how to spend your money. That is it. That is the goal. So here is what you need to know regarding the 2018s from Napa Valley.

Napa Valley 2018 – A Great Vintage

Unquestionably, Napa has a beautiful vintage on its hands with 2018. A long, cool growing season featuring little rain (it was one of the driest years on record), a massive crop, larger berries, and a mild, cool, even growing season produced classic, elegant wines that shine for their purity and freshness while still bringing solid depth of fruit and concentration. The cooler temperatures and large crop load meant harvest started well behind recent vintages and spanned into November for some estates. This was a welcome return to a sense of normalcy for the region, with most whites harvested in September and most Cabernet Sauvignon in October. Mild, dry weather in September (there was a small, inconsequential rainstorm late in September), October, and November meant there was no rush to pick, and growers were able to harvest at will.



The wines show a beautiful sense of freshness and purity, and at times can have an almost Bordeaux-like character in their tannins, acids, and textures. Phenolic ripeness and sugar development tracked nicely in 2018, and despite the cooler growing season and late harvest, these are ripe wines with no green or underripe characteristics. The fruit profiles lean toward the darker, almost blue end of the spectrum, and there is a notable vibrancy in these wines, as well as balance, that will allow them to age gracefully.

While the wines seemed moderately concentrated from barrel last year, with softer tannins, they firmed up substantially over the course of their *élevage* and show plenty of structure and tannic grip today. This is despite the total amount of tannins being less than in 2015 and 2016. I suspect this is due in part to the cooler, more focused style of the wines as well as the lower pHs and higher acid levels. Numerous estates commented on larger berry sizes yet more seeds per berry. Depending on how winemakers handled the extraction, this could have easily resulted in firmer, borderline bitter tannins. In general, though, tannin quality is terrific in the vintage. Alcohol levels are down over 2015 and 2016 as well. Another contributing factor in the more austere style of the wines is the lack of a massive amount of baby fat. Few wines have that voluptuous wealth of fruit and richness common in vintages such as 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2016, and many wines have a more focused, and at times narrow, mouthfeel and texture. Have no fear, though, these are still classic Napa Valley wines that rarely lack fruit.

Lastly, while 2018 is indeed a great vintage with incredibly consistent quality, the style can be slightly erratic. While some wines show more austerity and firm tannins, with more streamlined textures, others show an almost 2016-like level of sexiness and opulence. I think this has a lot to

do with the higher yields and how estates handled their wines in the cellar. In addition, the higher elevation regions in the northern part of the Valley can be riddled with subtle smoke taint, which I address later. So while 2018 is a great vintage that produced some legendary wines, it takes a little bit of navigating to get the most out of your money.



Smoke Taint

Smoke taint, which is caused by grapevines and grapes being exposed to smoke, was a problem in 2017, and it was a problem in 2018. What makes smoke taint such a difficult issue is that the same compounds used for detecting smoke taint in wines can also be imparted by charred oak barrels. To make matters even worse, these compounds can bond with the sugars in the grapes, making them undetectable from a sensory perspective early on – only to have them reemerge during fermentation or later in the bottle. Testing can be inconclusive, even when done prior to putting the wine into barrel, and it can be difficult to know if a wine has a smoke taint issue at an early stage.

While smoke taint was more of a problem for the entire Valley in 2017, thankfully, it's much less common in 2018 and appears to be limited to the appellations of Howell Mountain and, to a

lesser extent, Atlas Peak. It pains me to say it, but in my opinion, the whole appellation of Howell Mountain should be approached with caution in 2018. I tasted too many wines from this region that have subtle smoky, tarry flavors as well as gritty tannins. To make matters worse, the level of smoke taint is not consistent from bottle to bottle. I was able to retaste wines I thought were smoke tainted only to find the second bottle showing no obvious smoke taint. This variability is a nightmare for everyone involved – the consumer who does not want to waste money on wines that will be undrinkable in a few years, the estate who doesn't want to release tainted wines, and for the critic who is trying to advise on what to buy. All I can recommend is caution.

If you own wines from vintages or regions with known smoke taint issues, you should routinely check on their progress to see if they're developing any off characteristics. In my experience, smoke taint tends to get worse with age. If a wine begins to show signs of smoke taint, which can include ash, tar, and smoky aromatics as well as gritty, dry tannins, I suggest drinking it sooner rather than later.

What You Need To Know

Most importantly, **2018 is a great vintage** filled with beautiful wines at all price points. You can find a huge number of terrific wines in this report under \$100, as well as genuinely legendary wines that will rival anything out there. While **2018 checks in behind the benchmark vintages of 2013 and 2016**, it is in the same ballpark as 2012, 2014, and 2015, all terrific vintages. 2018 is a vintage that will be prized by those who prefer a slightly more classic, elegant style of wine, and the vast majority will benefit from at least short-term cellaring and have lengthy drink windows.

Napa Valley 2019 – Another Beautiful Vintage

2019 will be another terrific vintage for Napa Valley, and it should match or surpass 2018. Like 2018, this was a long, cool year (cooler than 2018) that produced vibrant, pure, elegant wines that share plenty of similarities to 2018, if not a hypothetical mix of 2010 and 2016. Yields were better managed, and concentration levels are similar to, if not slightly better than, 2018. Nevertheless, the wines share a similar purity of fruit and freshness with 2018, and at this early stage, I find the wines more alike than different. I'll review these in-depth in the next Napa report either later this year or in January of 2022.



The Wines

This report includes over 1,600 reviews, the largest report to date, and I still have a handful of wines to taste, which will be published in a follow-up report. While I normally spend upwards of three weeks in Napa Valley for this article, due to the ongoing COVID pandemic, this was shrunk to a short 5-day, whirlwind trip with just a handful of estate visits. The vast majority of these wines were tasted at my office in Colorado in December 2020. While this approach provides slightly less context regarding the vintage, it allows more time with the wines, and I was able to follow numerous wines for multiple days.

As always, I hope this report gives you some insight into this great vintage and helps you find wines that you want to drink.

Thanks for reading,

Jeb

2018 Acumen Cabernet Sauvignon Peak Attelas

RATING

95

TASTING DATE

1/27/2021

MATURITY

2025 - 2045

REVIEWED BY

Jeb Dunnuck

SOURCE

Napa Valley's
2018s

REVIEW

Print 

Red and blue fruits, violets, spring flowers, toasty oak, and obvious minerality all emerge from the 2018 Cabernet Sauvignon Peak Attelas. With full-bodied richness, remarkable freshness, and gorgeous tannins, this beautiful, elegant wine is another stunning success in this lineup. It's going to blossom with 4-5 years of bottle age and keep for two decades.

2018 Acumen Cabernet Sauvignon Peak

RATING

95

TASTING DATE

1/27/2021

MATURITY

unavailable

REVIEWED BY

Jeb Dunnuck

SOURCE

Napa Valley's
2018s

REVIEW

Print 

The 2018 Cabernet Sauvignon Peak showed nicely, with beautiful blue fruits, scorched earth, licorice, and violet aromas and flavors. With medium to full-bodied richness, it stays tight and compact on the palate, with a fresh, Bordeaux-like style in its tannins and acidity. It needs 4-5 years of bottle age but should age nicely on its purity and elegance.

2018 Acumen Cabernet Sauvignon Peak Edcora

RATING

93+

TASTING DATE

1/27/2021

MATURITY

2025 - 2045

REVIEWED BY

Jeb Dunnuck

SOURCE

Napa Valley's
2018s

REVIEW

[Print](#) 

Coming from Atlas Peak, the 2018 Cabernet Sauvignon Peak Edcora is cut from the same cloth yet has a more rounded, expansive mouthfeel as well as slightly more present, chewy tannins, which can be common from the Atlas Peak region of the valley. Blackcurrants, graphite, crushed stone, and earthy notes all define the bouquet. This full-bodied effort will benefit from 4-5 years of bottle age and should keep for two decades.

2019 Acumen Sauvignon Blanc

RATING

91

TASTING DATE

1/27/2021

MATURITY

2021 - 2024

REVIEWED BY

Jeb Dunnuck

SOURCE

Napa Valley's
2018s

REVIEW

Print 

An outstanding effort, the 2019 Sauvignon Blanc has a racy, green citrus, grapefruit, and mint-laced aromatic profile to go with medium-bodied richness and depth on the palate. It has bright acidity and a balanced, clean, classy style, all making for an outstanding Sauvignon Blanc to enjoy over the coming 2-3 years or so.

<https://jebdunnuck.com/2021/01/napa-valleys-2018s/>