



USA, Northern California, Napa Valley: 2016 & 2017 – A Tale of Two Vintages

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It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. This is the tale of two vintages—one of the easiest and most effortless, followed by one of the most extreme and dramatic vintages in Napa’s history: 2016 & 2017.

2016 Vintage

As a wine critic it is only natural that, when preparing a vintage report, I am constantly looking for something to criticize. 2016 was purported to be the fifth straight spectacular Northern California vintage in a row, and therefore, trust me, I’ve had my extra-large magnifying glass out this year. I’ve now tasted more than two thousand (and counting) 2016 Napa Valley and Sonoma County wines in bottle over the past couple of months and can only report—sorry—this is a particularly tough vintage to criticize.

That there is nothing so very remarkable to say about the 2016 growing season kind of goes to show how relatively laid-back it was for winemakers, at least compared to the vintages on either side of it. It also explains why this vintage possesses the one key attribute that even a potentially amazing vintage such as 2015 is lacking: consistency. As I suggested last year, this was one of those vintages where you had to be a really lousy winemaker not to make something good. I’ll add this small stipulation to that: if quality wine was strictly the intention. Therefore, if I’m going to dish out any general criticisms of the vintage here, it is that 2016 makes those wineries and winemakers whose number one focus is something other than quality (e.g., profits) stand out like a sore thumb.

“It started out as a very rainy winter and spring,” Dominus’s winemaker, Tod Mostero, wistfully commented, “followed by a warm spring and summer up until August—August was cooler. Then we had a nice, warm September.”

2016 was the beginning of the end of the drought vintages. Unlike the preceding drought vintages, culminating in the super-dry 2015 growing season, in 2016 the vines had received a good amount of precipitation that winter, so they were naturally revived. What’s more, for most areas of Northern California, 2016 was a cooler year overall than 2015, or 2014 for that matter. Please don’t rush to think this was therefore a cool vintage. It wasn’t. It was dry with a good amount of warmth but none of the heat spikes experienced during the vintages on either side.

I'm pleased to say that the bottled 2016s are showing much more nuanced than even their tightly bound, relatively closed barrel sample versions had initially revealed. The wines are still a lot shy at this stage than their 2015 counterparts, but their incredible vibrancy and intensity is evident. The reds further possess beautifully soft, ripe tannins and taut, muscular (but not skinny) fruit with compelling tension. What I particularly love about the character of the 2016s is a kind of effortless natural beauty from the get-go. What's more, this is a fabulous vintage for expressing terroir signatures over vintage signature, which is more pronounced in 2013, 2014 and 2015. In particular, many of Napa's "grand cru" vineyards—such as To Kalon, Dr. Crane, Spottswoode, Colgin IX Estate, Screaming Eagle, Kongsgaard The Judge (Chardonnay), etc.—offer lovers of these places a chance to really view the singular expressions that these sites have to offer with absolute clarity.



Spottswoode

With regards to the other red grapes, I'd like to add that 2016 was not just a great year for Napa Cabernet Sauvignon; there are many amazing Cabernet Francs and Merlots to be found too, possessing wonderful elegance and perfumes.

On the mainly Sonoma, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay side of things, Peter Michael's winemaker, Nick Morlet, reported that "2016 was a very small vintage—yields were down about 30%." This said, it was also an outstanding and very consistent vintage for Pinot Noir. When it comes to Chardonnay, however, I have to say that while there are some excellent examples, I am slightly favoring the styles of 2014,

2015 and, dare I say, 2017 for this variety, which generally seem to reveal more energy and layers. I hasten to add this is the slightest speck of criticism in a vintage tale largely bereft of conflict and strife.

2017 Vintage Preview – Red Bordeaux Varieties

2017 was another vintage story altogether. It was a year that started with a deluge of rain, including widespread flooding in Sonoma, later got blasted with intense heat during Labor Day weekend and, before the fat lady could sing, suffered the most devastating wildfires this area has seen just at the tail end of harvest. After all is said and done, I only judge what's in the glass. Now that I have had the chance to taste a fair number of 2017s from barrel from throughout the valley, I need to caution readers that this is a very inconsistent vintage for red Bordeaux varieties.

Many may think that 2017's biggest issue was the October fires that swept through the region and the ensuing smoke taint. This was a potential problem but not, in fact, the greatest one. It appears that the greater issue affecting quality was the Labor Day heat wave (September 1-4). During this spate of heat, temperatures spiked at over 100 degrees—over 110 degrees Fahrenheit in places—and held for over four days. Yes, there was some sunburn/raisining of berries on the vines, but this was generally of little consequence. Shade cloths, canopy cover and row orientations helped to control this factor, plus the latest in fruit-sorting techniques are now ubiquitous in the valley. I've tasted very few wines with any detectable baked fruit or "raisiny" characters. As I continue to taste the wines, what I can say is I think the biggest single factor affecting the quality of the 2017s is that the vines across Napa Valley and much of Sonoma had shut down during that Labor Day heat wave and some never fully restarted the ripening process. I've spoken to a lot of winemakers who commented that sugar levels in the berries stalled, in some cases for least three weeks or more after this heat wave. More difficult to ascertain at that time was precisely what was happening in terms of tannin and flavor evolution. The truth is in the tasting, and unfortunately, it appears that a lot of red Bordeaux varieties' tannins struggled to become fully resolved. On paper, the IPTs (tannin index levels) suggest particularly high tannin levels in the 2017s, but the quality of tannins can be disappointing in many cases, revealing hard, chewy and sometimes bitter frames. Clever winemakers who recognized this straight away, in unison with the naturally lower sugar levels/potential alcohols and more delicate flavors, eased right up on extractions. But remember that it was extremely difficult for a lot of winemakers to keep their heads fully in the game because it was during fermentations that most of Napa and Sonoma was on fire, and in some cases, it was impossible to even get to the wineries to manage pump-overs, etc. during the chaos.

It was because of the sluggish ripening after Labor Day weekend that a number of the best Cabernet vineyards still had fruit hanging on October 8th, the first day of the fires. And so, many wineries across the valley lost some fruit. Napa Valley Vintners reckons it was no more than 10% to 15% of the entire crop that was still hanging when the fires began; however, this included a lot of "grand cru" vineyards. In some cases, it was a whole vineyard, in others it was just a block or two. Some wineries were able to harvest within a day or two after the fires. Others harvested later. Wines were made from the fruit harvested after the fires, but it now appears that little if any of these post-fire harvest cuvées will be viable to use as even a small component of blends. The effects of smoke taint from the fruit has proven insidious, often passing the lab tests only to rear its ugly head at various stages of tastings. Most respected wineries with sound reputations for high quality will not be making 2017 wines from fruit that was hanging after the fires started. And so, a lot of producers will be taking a financial hit, including Paul Hobbs, who told me he figures about 50% of his Cabernet was not viable and has sold this for bulk. Elsewhere, the impact was even more stark. Here's what Screaming Eagle's winemaker, Nick Gislason, had to say:

“As for 2017, the Merlot that came in at the beginning of harvest before the fires struck was very nice, along with the first couple of small Cabernet blocks. However, the vast majority of our fruit was still on the vines maturing when the fires came and, thus, was lost to us. When the smoke finally cleared, we cut and discarded all of it. Any wine for a 2017 Screaming Eagle or Flight would be made exclusively from our tiny pre-fire harvest, is likely to be minuscule and may not be released at all if it does not meet our quality standards. As a harvest cut short, we have very few blending components to work with, and this may limit our ability to put together blends of sufficient quality.”

Have I tasted any smoke-tainted barrel samples? Yes. But because they were barrel samples and not finished wines, I took the decision to inform winemakers there and then about my findings and leave it with them to decide if they will bottle or not. I have not included in this report those barrel sample reviews for wines that I believe were affected by smoke taint. Once bottled, however, I fully intend to report on any smoke-tainted wines I taste.

So, what is the takeaway from this preview? At best, readers can generally expect the 2017 Cabernets to be elegant, refreshing, medium-bodied wines with pretty perfumes, red and black fruit signatures and subtle dried herbs in the background. Attributes of the Bordeaux varieties include very deep colors and high IPTs. Tannin levels may well run very high this year, but the quality is inconsistent, as the textures aren't as plush and ripe as in previous vintages; so, generally speaking, judicious extractions were key. Alcohols tend to be lower than previous vintages (without watering back), and there is a nice freshness to the wines, although they are mostly not nearly as complex as the 2016s.

My final word of caution to readers: I would not purchase 2017 red wines based solely on barrel tasting notes/scores for this vintage. There are too many variables and unknowns. I strongly urge readers to wait for the bottled wine reviews.

2017 Vintage Preview – Pinot Noirs & White Varieties

I need to include a few words in this 2017 vintage preview about the Pinot Noirs and white varieties, which tell a very different tale of this vintage than the Bordeaux reds. Some vineyards had been harvested prior to the Labor Day heat wave and all had come in prior to the fires. The signatures of the pre- and post-Labor Day fruit are very different (perfumed and mineral for pre-heat wave versus bold and exotic for post-heat wave), but both equally have the potential for high quality. The huge difference between the potential for quality for Pinots and whites versus the Bordeaux reds is that the former group did not have the ripening of Bordeaux variety tannins to contend with.

Peter Michael Winery's Nick Morlet informed me that “2017 was a warm vintage and yields were down slightly on average—by about 10%. We started harvesting the white grapes on August 31st for the highest block of Ma Belle-Fille vineyard. I find this to be a very hedonistic vintage for whites. I think it is the most exotic Sauvignon Blanc we have done!”

Mark Aubert of Aubert commented on his 2017 Chardonnays: “The juices were already very complex with great natural acid. We saw no real effects from the Labor Day heat wave. In Sonoma, the impact was much less. The heat came down after that 100 degree peak very fast. These 2017s remind me a little of the 2012s.”

The impact of the heat wave is slightly more evident in the Pinots, robbing them of some of the elegance and finesse that they might otherwise have exhibited. This slight criticism aside, the Pinots I've encountered so far are deliciously bold, opulent and hedonic in their expressions.

Regarding the 2017 whites, of which I've tasted a good number in bottle and from barrel, I can comment that it is an outstanding year based on what I have seen so far. The Chardonnays in particular possess incredible energy with lots of layers and compelling intensity/richness, revealing a beautiful silver lining to this otherwise difficult vintage.

Readers should note that this is Part One of my annual Napa report. Some major wineries to feature in the second part and dedicated feature articles publishing in November include: Hundred Acre, Sloan, Kongsgaard, Continuum, Quintessa, Joseph Phelps and more.

2017 ACUMEN • Sauvignon Blanc Mountainside

[View wine](#)

Rating: 90

Price: \$30

Drink Date: 2018 - 2021

Reviewed by:

[Lisa Perrotti-Brown](#)

Issue Date: 29th Oct 2018

Source:

[Mid-October 2018 New Releases, The Wine Advocate](#)

Composed entirely of Sauvignon Blanc, the 2017 Sauvignon Blanc Mountainside features seriously intense notes of pineapple, green mango and lemon slices with touches of lime leaves, wet pebbles and grass. Medium to full-bodied, the palate delivers concentrated citrus and herbal layers with a racy line of freshness and great length.

Producer: ACUMEN

From: USA, California, North Coast, Napa Valley

Color: White

Type: Table

Sweetness: Dry

Variety: Sauvignon Blanc

2017 ACUMEN • Sauvignon Blanc Peak

[View wine](#)

Rating: 93+

Price: \$75

Drink Date: 2018 - 2025

Reviewed by:

[Lisa Perrotti-Brown](#)

Issue Date: 29th Oct 2018

Source:

[Mid-October 2018 New Releases, The Wine Advocate](#)

The 2017 Sauvignon Blanc Peak unfurls to reveal fragrant lime blossoms and honeysuckle scents over a core of fresh grapefruit, lemon curd and crushed rocks plus a waft of baker's yeast. Medium to full-bodied, it bursts in the mouth with loads of citrus and mineral layers and a crisp, refreshing line with a very long, chalky finish.

Producer: ACUMEN

From: USA, California, North Coast, Napa Valley, Atlas Peak

Color: White

Type: Table

Sweetness: Dry

Variety: Sauvignon Blanc