

USA, California, Napa Valley: The Bright, Shiny New Napa Valley 2018s

## LISA PERROTTI-BROWN

5th Nov 2020 | [The Wine Advocate](#) | [November 2020 Week 1](#)

If a lot of winemakers played the 2017 Napa Valley reds close to their chests, seemingly nervous to show them too soon (or sometimes at all), the opposite was the true of the 2018s. Indeed, I've been tracking the progress of many of these bright, shiny new 2018 beauties pretty much since they went to barrel. Their transformations, at times, have been nothing short of thrilling. Here was a vintage of a kind that I don't think Napa Valley has experienced for a long time. It was a bit like returning to an era of more moderate, benevolent-natured summers that I have read and heard the former generations of winemakers tell about. The foggy mornings, followed by sunny afternoons. Cooling day breezes. Brisk, chilly nights. Not a heat wave in sight—not even for Labor Day weekend. The ripening curve was gradual, achingly slow and thankfully steady. It was an atypical vintage for our modern times and, paradoxically, a great one, which isn't to say it was without its pitfalls.

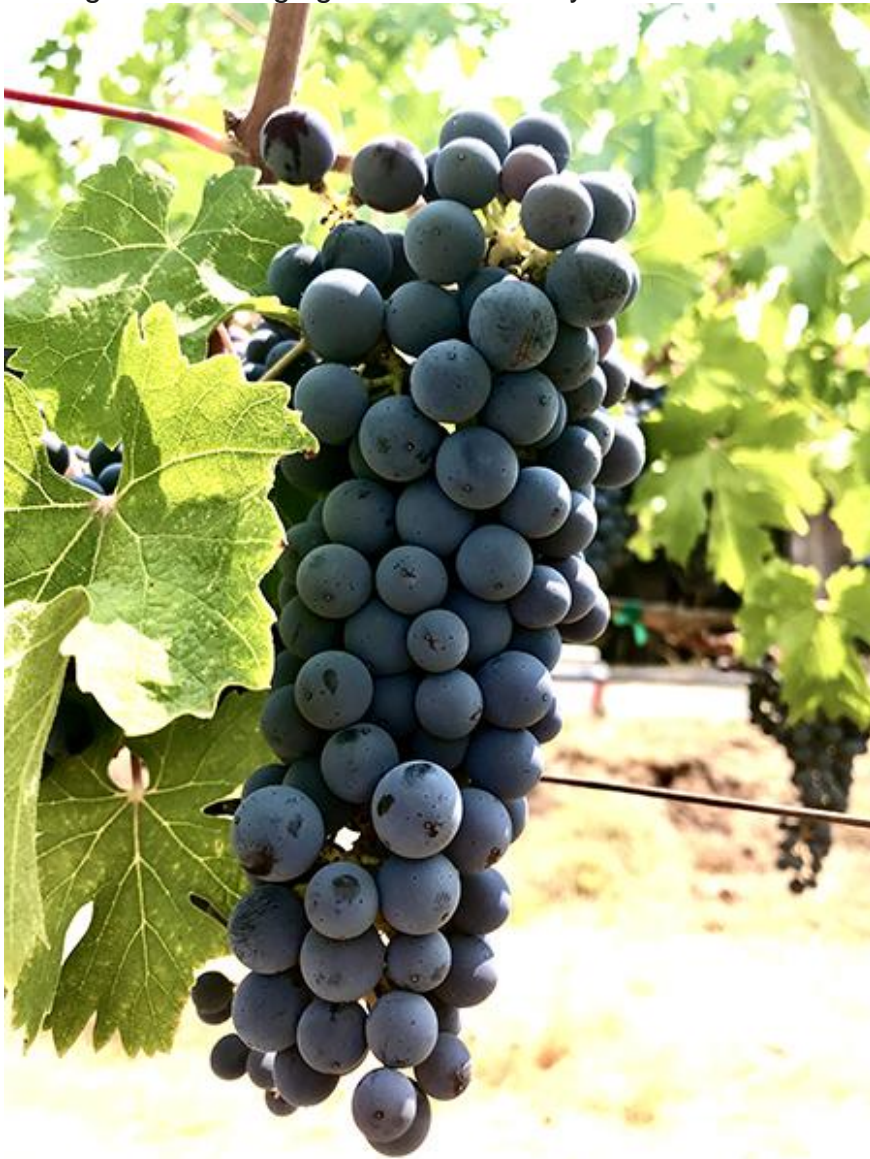
### **The Growing Season**

To reiterate my first look last year at the 2018s, if I had to use just one word to sum up the 2018 harvest, it would be: LATE. Come the end of September, when traditionally most of the Napa Valley red varieties would be coming into the cellars thick and fast, local vintners began getting itchy secateurs. For the most part, the fruit just wasn't ready.

Backing up to the story of the growing season, after the perfect storm of 2017—which included a winter deluge, a Labor Day heat storm and wildfires in October—2018's conditions were wonderfully unremarkable. The year kicked off with a little winter rain and a mild spring, leading to a relatively late bud burst and then an easy, healthy flowering and fruit set. If there is any notable quibble about this vintage, it is that flowering and fruit set went a little too well, setting some pretty hefty crops across the valley. Following 2017's slim pickings, many growers were reluctant to drop much of the nascent fruit early on. If previous vintages were anything to go on, then the vines

generally should have had the necessary sunshine, heat and wherewithal to ripen those generous crops. Problem was, 2018 was nothing like any vintage from recent years in terms of sunshine and heat.

2018's summer was cool to warm, bereft of the heat spikes that had to be averted in previous vintages with shade cloths, canopy cover, misters, etc. There were a lot of foggy mornings followed by hazy afternoons. Ripening proceeded at a steady and yet notably slow rate. Unusually, it was well into August before most of the Cabernet even started to go through veraison. The knock-on effect was a harvest waiting game, which was mostly not an issue since the autumn remained dry and warm but not hot. Come Halloween and into the first week of November, there was still a fair amount of Cabernet Sauvignon still hanging around the valley.



*Big 2018 cluster*

"Volume is looking great, up 20% to 30% increase over average crop quantity," noted Napa Valley Vintners in their 2018 vintage recap. In fact, the bumper crop caught a lot

of growers by surprise, not because of the amounts of bunches—this was anticipated—it was the whopping great cluster weights that threw off everyone’s crop predictions. Growers were reporting an increase in cluster weight of around 20% or more in 2018.

“We’re really excited by the 2018s,” Phillip Corallo-Titus, winemaker for Chappellet as well as his own Titus label, recently informed me. “2018 was a big vintage, but there are examples like 1982 in Bordeaux where high-yielding vintages were also great. Our vineyard manager, Dave Perio, knows what to do when a big vintage comes through. It is all about multiple passes, thinning out clusters when they are just coming in, taking off the wings, then the green thinning. The final move was to take off another three clusters per vine. Dave’s good about taking flak for all the fruit on the ground. ‘Don’t look on the ground,’ he says, ‘look on the vine.’ That was a constant theme for us—lightening the load. The whole crop moved with uniformity. We had a big crop. We had lots of options for blending—great wines and lots of ‘em. I’m the last one to declare a vintage to be great, but we knew we had something very special.”

### **2018 Style & Quality**

“I loved it!” winemaker Nick Gislason of Screaming Eagle said when I asked him for his thoughts on the 2018 vintage. “Everything is just really perfumey, with a lot of verve and a lot of freshness. It’s a wholesome vintage, if that makes sense? The canopies were big and healthy; there was a lot of life in the vineyard. After 2017, it felt like the bloom that comes afterward.”

As my barrel tastings last year suggested, the 2018s are packed with purity, vibrancy and energy. The style of the vintage—across all varieties—appears to reveal effortlessly medium-bodied wines with moderate alcohol levels. The wines possess a good/balanced amount of acidity but are generally not as marked by freshness/tartness as the 2017s. The best wines have fantastic intensity and depth without being concentrated/weighty, offering bright, crunchy fruit profiles. Phenolic development (tannin and color compounds) tracked closely with sugar accumulation this year, meaning the tannins ripened at more moderate sugar levels, offering a solid, finely grained, approachable backbone and promising aging potential. I was concerned early on about pyrazines—overly green or herbaceous characters. From my bottled wine tastings so far, I have yet to find a single 2018 red wine where I thought pyrazines were an issue.



*Sloan Estate on November 1*

When tasting the barrel samples last year, I was slightly concerned that some wines came off a bit lean and skeletal, lacking mid-palate intensity and finish. In a few cases, I noted that red varieties did not get their tannins fully ripe, seeming a little firm and chewy. However, as I suspected, many of those wines have filled-out nicely, while the tannins have mellowed.

“The wines do something weird,” Phillip Corallo-Titus commented, when I mentioned this evolution of the 2018s in barrel. “They put on weight and muscle when you’re not looking. The 2018s got bigger, darker and ultimately had ‘more’ by the time they were bottled.”

I’ve found the best of the best 2018 reds to have rock-solid structures with firm, ripe tannins and a lot of freshness. The nuanced fruit profiles promise an ability for these

wines to develop considerably with age. As always, I'm conservative with my drinking windows, but I think it is safe to say that many of the best Cabernet Sauvignon-based 2018s should be able to cellar beautifully for 40 to 50 years or more.

This all said, the fact remains that for some producers there was only so much that could be filled out with barrel aging. From what I'm seeing in a few of the bottled wines, there were a minority of wineries that did get a little overzealous with their yields, perhaps neither fully realizing the increased bunch sizes, nor being able to anticipate the sustained bouts of cooler weather and less sunshine than Napa typically receives. In short, there are a few skinny, attenuated 2018 Napa reds to look out for, but not many. In fact, this situation seems more prevalent with the white varieties, where I've run into some downright dilute Sauvignon Blancs and Chardonnays. As I mentioned in [my 2017 Napa report](#) published last week, I am generally favoring the 2017 vintage for Napa whites.

In the end, thus far I've been impressed by the consistency of quality of the 2018 vintage across red varieties. There are many great wines at the lower and middle ends of the pricing scale, so there is a lot of value to be found this vintage. As previously alluded, yields were generous this year, so even considering the small 2017 vintage, there should be plenty of these bright, shiny new Napa 2018s to go around.

### **2018 Smoke Taint**

While the incidents of smoke impacting vineyards in 2018 appear to be localized and few in number, it has reared its ugly head again this year. As I mentioned last year, Cleo Pahlmeyer told me that they were impacted by smoke taint issues in 2018 on their higher-elevation vineyard on Atlas Peak. The wind carrying smoke from the Mendocino Complex Fire that year had a detrimental effect, blanketing their vineyard right at veraison. Therefore, there will be no estate fruit in the 2018 Pahlmeyer. I have tasted some other wines from Atlas Peak and not picked up any smoke taint characters. However, I was stopped dead in my tracks a couple of weeks ago when I detected smoke taint on some 2018 reds from Howell Mountain. This I was not expecting, until I considered proximity and how the Mendocino Complex Fire may well have impacted some of those vineyards as well during veraison. I hasten to add—this is not to say all Howell Mountain or Atlas Peak wines will have been impacted. When I taste, I always taste with an open mind and give all wines the benefit of a doubt. But if I do pick up any off-characters, I will comment on them and score the wines accordingly with a question mark or, in slight smoke taint cases, a score and a question mark.

### **More 2018s & 2019s to Come!**

I must apologize—given our new travel and tasting restrictions, my tasting process is slower than usual. However, I am tasting, tasting, tasting more of these great 2018s every day and still have important winery visits in the pipeline. My next set of Napa reviews will be published at the end of November. Until then, happy wine hunting!

# 2018 ACUMEN • Cabernet Sauvignon Peak

<b>Rating</b> 94+	<b>Release Price</b> \$150	<b>Drink Date</b> 2022 - 2046
<b>Reviewed by</b> 👤 <a href="#">Lisa Perrotti-Brown</a>	Deep garnet-purple colored, the 2018 Cabernet Sauvignon Peak charges out of the gate with energetic scents of red and black currants, fresh blackberries and boysenberries with suggestions of camphor, cardamom, tar and new leather plus a waft of pencil shavings. Full-bodied, concentrated and decadent in the mouth, the palate has a solid foundation of firm, grainy tannins and lively freshness to support, finishing long with a pleasantly surprising floral perfume coming through at the end.	
<b>Issue Date</b> 5th Nov 2020		
<b>Source</b> <a href="#">November 2020 Week 1, The Wine Advocate</a>		

<b>Rating</b> (91 - 93)	<b>Release Price</b> \$150	<b>Drink Date</b> NA
<b>Reviewed by</b> 👤 <a href="#">Lisa Perrotti-Brown</a>	A barrel sample, the deep purple-black colored 2018 Cabernet Sauvignon Peak features expressive scents of black plums, crushed blackberries and warm cassis with hints of truffles, tapenade and fertile loam. The palate is medium to full-bodied, firm and grainy with seamless freshness and loads of bright blue and black fruit on the finish.	
<b>Issue Date</b> 27th Nov 2019		
<b>Source</b> <a href="#">End of November 2019, The Wine Advocate</a>		

# 2018 ACUMEN • Cabernet Sauvignon

## Peak Edcora Vineyard

<b>Rating</b> 93+	<b>Release Price</b> \$175	<b>Drink Date</b> 2022 - 2039
<b>Reviewed by</b> 👤 <a href="#">Lisa Perrotti-Brown</a>	Deep garnet-purple colored, the 2018 Cabernet Sauvignon Peak Edcora Vineyard needs a little coaxing to reveal subtle scents of baked black plums, stewed cherries, mulberries and crème de cassis with suggestions of mocha, star anise, garrigue and sautéed herbs. The full-bodied palate is completely packed with black fruit preserves, framed by velvety tannins and just enough freshness, finishing long and earthy.	
<b>Issue Date</b> 5th Nov 2020		
<b>Source</b> <a href="#">November 2020 Week 1, The Wine Advocate</a>		

<b>Rating</b> (90 - 92)	<b>Release Price</b> \$175	<b>Drink Date</b> NA
<b>Reviewed by</b> 👤 <a href="#">Lisa Perrotti-Brown</a>	A barrel sample, the deep purple-black colored 2018 Cabernet Sauvignon Peak Edcora Vineyard is a little closed to begin, offering subtle suggestions of fresh black cherries, mulberries and cassis with touches of underbrush, pencil shavings and tar. The palate is medium-bodied, restrained and understated with a firm, chewy texture and plenty of freshness, finishing with a peppery kick.	
<b>Issue Date</b> 27th Nov 2019		
<b>Source</b> <a href="#">End of November 2019, The Wine Advocate</a>		

# 2018 ACUMEN • Cabernet Sauvignon Peak Attelas Vineyard

<b>Rating</b> 94+	<b>Release Price</b> \$175	<b>Drink Date</b> 2020 - 2040
<b>Reviewed by</b> 👤 <a href="#">Lisa Perrotti-Brown</a>	Deep garnet-purple colored, the 2018 Cabernet Sauvignon Peak Attelas Vineyard springs from the glass with gregarious scents of Morello cherries, blackcurrant cordial, wild blueberries and mulberries plus suggestions of cinnamon stick, clove oil, camphor and dark chocolate. The full-bodied palate is jam-packed with expressive black fruit preserves layers, complemented by beautiful floral accents and supported with ripe, grainy tannins, finishing long and with impressive energy.	
<b>Issue Date</b> 5th Nov 2020		
<b>Source</b> <a href="#">November 2020 Week 1, The Wine Advocate</a>		

<b>Rating</b> (92 - 94)+	<b>Release Price</b> \$175	<b>Drink Date</b> NA
<b>Reviewed by</b> 👤 <a href="#">Lisa Perrotti-Brown</a>	Deep purple-black in color, the barrel sample of 2018 Cabernet Sauvignon Peak Attelas Vineyard strides confidently out of the glass with a classic nose of cedar chest, cassis, warm plums and pencil lead with hints of bay leaves, camphor and yeast extract. The palate is medium to full-bodied, firm and grainy, with bold freshness and loads of crunchy fruit, finishing with an herbal lift.	
<b>Issue Date</b> 27th Nov 2019		
<b>Source</b> <a href="#">End of November 2019, The Wine Advocate</a>		

<https://www.robertparker.com/articles/iktsYATjRfNQqt5LT/usa-california-napa-valley-new-2018-vintage-bottled>