

Home > News & Features > Retrospective / Vertical

2000 California Cabernet Retrospective: A *Garagiste* Scores a Victory

4 wines stand out a decade on; slim pickings among 25 bottlings reflect the vintage's challenges

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For the past 30 years, senior editor James Laube has been reviewing and writing about California Cabernets. Each year, he conducts blind retrospective tastings of older vintages. This year, he has tasted wines from 2000. It's a way, Laube says, to examine how California wines age and recommend when the wines are at their peak. It's also fun, he says, to find the surprises—good and otherwise—that come with cellaring wines.

Chalk one up for a Napa *garagiste*. From the challenging 2000 vintage, the Buoncristiani brothers' Napa Valley Cabernet emerged as one of the few standouts among 25 wines in a retrospective blind tasting I conducted recently. The family made their wine that year in their two-car garage in a Napa suburb.

As a vintage, 2000 was difficult, generally cool and drawn out, and it showed in the flavor and depth of the wines. Ten years on, only four Cabernets—Buoncristiani (91 points), Duckhorn Estate Grown (91), Bryant Family (90) and Staglin (90)—merited outstanding marks.

Another four wines—Lewis Reserve, Colgin Tychson Hill and two Joseph Phelps bottlings, Backus and Insignia—were also drinking quite well. All of the above have reached their peak and should be enjoyed now, and the other wines tasted have done so as well or are now fading.

The 2000 vintage was not a great year to cellar. The wines did show well early on, when the flavors were the purest and freshest, and many winemakers were happy with the quality, given the cool growing season that had made ripening difficult.

Both 1999 and 2001 were vastly superior vintages. Celia Welch, who was the winemaker at Staglin in 2000, says grapevines have a natural tendency to be “alternate bearing.” That is, the potential crop size is set in the buds the year prior to the vintage.

“Sunny conditions in spring 1999, plus a smaller crop that year, meant that in vintage 2000 the vines were once again ready to bear a large crop load,” said Welch, now the owner of Corra winery. “Yields were up overall, and especially in deep-soil vineyards. A large crop plus heavy rain in early [to] mid-October was a tough combination.”

Despite that, the 2000 Staglin is well-balanced, still offering creamy mocha notes and dried berry, mineral and sage flavors.

“I was actually quite excited about the vintage,” admitted Jay Buoncristiani, one of four winemaker brothers who



David Prince/Getty Images

Wine Spectator senior editor James Laube reviews 25 top California Cabernets from the 2000 vintage.

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turned their family's humble home-winemaking space into a bonded winery in 1999, with impressive results, and have since moved to a new facility. "I was a bit cautious though," he added, "because there was a bunch of hubbub about 2000 being such a crappy year for quality."

The roller-coaster weather did test his patience, Buoncristiani recalled. During October 2000, he noted difficulty with flavor development, acidity and green tannins in the grapes. "Waiting it out was the only thing to do, especially since we were such a young company and every single berry on each cluster was going to have a big impact on our resulting wines," he said. "So we dropped more fruit, removing pockets of green here and there, and just waited until the fruit tasted better. Even the Merlot and Malbec that I folded into the final blend hung on the vine at least two weeks longer than originally expected."

The result was a Cabernet that offers an appealing mix of dark berry flavors, touches of cherry, plum and spice. The Buoncristiani is fresh and vibrant, with only a trace of maturity. That their 2000 upstaged some of Napa's better-known Cabernet producers in this blind tasting is proof that hobbyists can transition to pros, sometimes with relative ease.

The 2000 estate bottling from Duckhorn—a well-respected Cabernet and Merlot producer, dating to the late 1970s, whose wines typically age well—shows a flavor profile similar to Buoncristiani's, with maturing Cabernet flavors that still have a measure of freshness. The 2000 Bryant shows the meatier, gamier, more rustic side of Cabernet in a cool year.

Scores and full notes follow for the wines in the blind tasting. A handful of wines were not reviewed due to off bottles.

BUONCRISTIANI Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2000 Score: 91 | Release price: \$55 | Current price: \$55

An appealing mix of ripe black cherry, blackberry, plum and spice, showing signs of maturity, yet still fresh and vibrant. Full-bodied, gaining depth and complexity on the finish. 2000 California Cabernet blind retrospective (August 2010). Drink now through 2015. 142 cases made. —J.L.

DUCKHORN Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Estate Grown 2000

Score: 91 | Release price: \$80 | Current price: \$80

At a stage where, though mature, this offers ripe berry, cherry and plum fruit that's full-bodied, structured and firmly tannic, yet maintains its fresh fruit profile. Ends with chewy tannins. 2000 California Cabernet blind retrospective (August 2010). Drink now through 2015. 2,978 cases made. —J.L.

BRYANT FAMILY Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2000

Score: 90 | Release price: \$200 | Current price: \$220

Rich and concentrated, if rustic and rough around the edges, with a chunky, gamy, meaty core of dried currant, berry, loamy earth and roasted herb notes. For all its ruggedness, this is deep and concentrated. 2000 California Cabernet blind retrospective. Drink now through 2015. 800 cases made. —J.L.

STAGLIN Cabernet Sauvignon Rutherford 2000 Score: 90 | Release price: \$100 | Current price: \$50

Mature yet complex, with integrated creamy mocha, dried currant, blackberry, mineral and sage flavors. Full-bodied, ending with a roasted coffee note. 2000 California Cabernet blind retrospective. Drink now through 2015. 3,080 cases made. —J.L.

LEWIS Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Reserve 2000 Score: 89 | Release price: \$80 | Current price: \$80

Complex and vibrant, offering a pleasant mix of youth and maturity, with savory dried currant, sage, blackberry and black licorice flavors that are firm and engaging. 2000 California Cabernet blind retrospective. Drink now through 2015. 2,300 cases made. —J.L.

COLGIN Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Tychson Hill Vineyard 2000

Score: 88 | Release price: \$175 | Current price: \$120

Bordeaux-like in its complexity, with loamy earth, dried currant, sage, chicory, cedar and sandalwood, this is trim, layered and well-proportioned, with the signature drying, earthy tannins of the vintage. 2000 California Cabernet blind retrospective. Drink now through 2015. 400 cases made. —J.L.

JOSEPH PHELPS Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville Backus 2000**Score: 88 | Release price: \$150 | Current price: \$65**

Mature, with notes of dried herb, berry, mineral and cedary graphite-pencil shavings that are full-bodied, ending on a simpler plane, with crisp, clipped tannins. 2000 California Cabernet blind retrospective. Drink now through 2015. 1,000 cases made. —J.L.

JOSEPH PHELPS Insignia Napa Valley 2000 Score: 88 | Release price: \$137 | Current price: \$85

Trim and focused, with a tight, vibrant mix of mineral, dried currant, cedar, spice and loamy earth notes that are complex and mature. Ends with drying tannins. Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Petit Verdot, Cabernet Franc and Malbec. 2000 California Cabernet blind retrospective. Drink now through 2015. 15,000 cases made. —J.L.

ALTAMURA Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2000 Score: 87 | Release price: \$60 | Current price: \$60

Drying out, with a mix of savory herb and dried currant, a touch of sweet plum and then loamy earth and mineral. 2000 California Cabernet blind retrospective. Drink now through 2015. 3,000 cases made. —J.L.

BOND Vecina Napa Valley 2000 Score: 87 | Release price: \$150 | Current price: \$89

Aromas of ripe plum and strawberry jam show the degree of ripeness, with a candied edge. Ends with a racy berry aftertaste and firm tannins. 2000 California Cabernet blind retrospective. Drink now through 2015. 675 cases made. —J.L.

CARTER Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville Beckstoffer Vineyards 2000**Score: 87 | Release price: \$55 | Current price: \$45**

Drinking well, this is mature, with an earthy edge to the faded, delicate rose petal, dried currant, mineral and cedar notes, ending with firm acidity and a touch of brick and black licorice. 2000 California Cabernet blind retrospective. Drink now through 2015. 285 cases made. —J.L.

ROBERT MONDAVI Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Reserve 2000**Score: 87 | Release price: \$125 | Current price: \$51**

Elegant, with mature cedar, loamy earth, dried currant and green olive notes. Full-bodied and balanced, this is best now. 2000 California Cabernet blind retrospective. Drink now through 2015. —J.L.

WHITEHALL LANE Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Reserve 2000**Score: 87 | Release price: \$65 | Current price: \$65**

Mature and drying out, with dried currant, graphite, cedar and olive flavors that are slow to unfold, but gain depth and nuance. Ends with drying, cedary tannins, but also complex flavors. 2000 California Cabernet blind retrospective. Drink now through 2015. 3,147 cases made. —J.L.

CHAPPELLET Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Pritchard Hill Estate Vineyard 2000**Score: 86 | Release price: \$110 | Current price: \$110**

Aromas of cedar, sandalwood, dried currant and sage take on a mineral quality on the palate that's somewhat simpler. About the same as when it was released. 2000 California Cabernet blind retrospective. Drink now through 2014. 800 cases made. —J.L.

PIÑA Cabernet Sauvignon Howell Mountain 2000 Score: 86 | Release price: \$48 | Current price: \$48

Trim and cedary, with dried currant, sage, mineral and graphite notes that are full-bodied, yet ending with drying tannins. 2000 California Cabernet blind retrospective. Drink now. 337 cases made. —J.L.

CAKEBREAD Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Benchland Select 2000**Score: 85 | Release price: \$90 | Current price: \$51**

Mature, with a tight core of earthy currant, herb, sage and cedary oak character, this is very tight and unevolved, ending with the same chunky flavor themes. 2000 California Cabernet blind retrospective. Drink now through 2015. 2,000 cases made. —J.L.

WHITEHALL LANE Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Leonardini Vineyard 2000**Score: 83 | Release price: \$85 | Current price: \$85**

Marked by a strong loamy earth edge that strays into a whiff of barnyard and veers to drier flavors. 2000 California Cabernet blind retrospective. Drink now. 312 cases made. —J.L.