

Vintage report

Californian Cabernet 2013

Widely hailed as a great vintage for Cabernet Sauvignon, 2013 was nonetheless a high-wire act. William Kelley assesses the wines' quality and longevity

FOR MANY WINEMAKERS and vintners, California's 2013 Cabernet Sauvignon vintage is quite simply the finest of their careers. 'I can now die happy as a winemaker,' says Tod Mostero of Dominus Estate. 'I'd love to see another year as good as this, but I can settle for just one.' Up and down the state, the refrain is the same. Even veteran winemaker Ric Forman, who is celebrating his 40th vintage in Napa Valley this year, contentedly acknowledges that 2013 ranks as 'one of the good ones!'

Across California, vines suffering through a second consecutive year of drought produced unusually small berries, with a high solids-to-juice ratio. A consistently warm summer and early autumn, uninterrupted by heat spikes or rain, led to an early harvest in ideal conditions.

'The raw material in 2013 was the best we've ever seen,' reflects Thomas Brown, one of Napa Valley's most celebrated consultants and winemaker for Schrader Cellars and Maybach Family Vineyards. His assessment is echoed by growers and winemakers in other appellations including the Santa Cruz Mountains and Sonoma County.

The result? Wines of extraordinary depth and tannic concentration, built for the ages. As Eric Baugher of Ridge Vineyards reveals, 2013 is 'undoubtedly the most tannic vintage of the new millennium', but its structure is complemented by a remarkable wealth of fruit – so much so that Ridge forewent its

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With thanks to Hedonism Wines (www.hedonism.co.uk); Roberson Wine (www.robersonwine.com); Uncorked Ltd (www.uncorked.co.uk); Honest Grapes (www.honestgrapes.co.uk) & Justerini & Brooks (www.justerinis.com) for the loan of the bottles



Kelley's top 2013 Californian Cabernets

Dunn Vineyards, Cabernet Sauvignon, Howell Mountain, Napa Valley 2013 97

£110 The Winery

Aromas of blackcurrant, blackberry, rich earth, spice and liquorice are followed by a palate of striking persistence and structural amplitude. In 2013 this is typically large-scaled, fresh and built for the long haul, but Mike Dunn's thoughtful changes to the estate's barrel programme have resulted in more refined tannins. Brettanomyces issues that plagued the Dunn wines about 15 years ago also seem long gone, so nothing should compromise their lovely evolution in the cellar. **Drink** 2023-2070 **Alcohol** 13.9%



Harlan Estate, Oakville, Napa Valley 2013 97

POA Harrods, Thorman Hunt, Woodwinters

Alluring aromas of juicy mulberry, black raspberry, graphite,

dried herbs and rich cigar tobacco introduce a large-scaled wine framed by an ample and refined tannic chassis. Once again, Harlan's perfectionist team has composed a compelling portrait of its hillside estate in Oakville. **Drink** 2023-2055 **Alc** 14.5%

Spottswoode, Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, St Helena, Napa Valley 2013 97

POA Domaine Direct

Nuances of clove, tar and graphite marry with aromas of crunchy dark fruit, introducing a firmly structured and intensely concentrated wine that displays striking cut and energy. This is one of the best young Spottswoodes of recent times, and one of the most vibrant, primary benchland Cabernet Sauvignons of the vintage – it's also likely to be one of the most long-lived. **Drink** 2023-2055 **Alc** 13.9%

Cain, Five, Spring Mountain, Napa Valley 2013 96

POA Justerini & Brooks

A fragrant but savoury bouquet of perfumed blackberry, rich earth, fennel seed and cigar tobacco leads to a wine with lovely cut, vibrancy and concentration, structured around firm but refined 2013 tannins. Christopher Howell deserves more recognition for the amazing consistency, longevity and sophistication that his wines from this striking Spring Mountain site routinely achieve, as anyone with Cain bottlings in their cellar from the 1980s and 1990s can attest. **Drink** 2023-2065 **Alc** 13.9% ➤

Photographs: Mike Prior; Victor Utyupin/Alamy Stock Photo



Above: harvesting at Ridge's Monte Bello Estate in the Santa Cruz Mountains

customary egg-white fining, a practice that can refine aggressive tannins but which was deemed unnecessary in 2013.

Unlike the rather facile and fruit-forward 2012 vintage, the 2013s possess, as Mostero puts it, 'another dimension' that makes them 'unique'. Indeed, comparisons with other vintages seem otiose. 'The vintage amplified everything,' Brown explains, 'giving us elevated levels of acidity and tannin that cut through the fruit, preserving balance.' The hallmark of 2013 is thus a marriage of ripe fruit with the savoury qualities that modern California Cabernet Sauvignon so frequently lacks. That makes for striking complexity and sophistication in the glass.

Perils of excess

Even a vintage as propitious as 2013, however, can present challenges. For one, Cabernet reached optimum maturity hard on the heels of earlier-ripening varieties across California. Many winemakers accordingly struggled to process so much fruit in so short a time. 'Never before,' Baugher told me in October 2013, 'have I had to ferment so much Cabernet Sauvignon at the same time as Zinfandel, Syrah, Carignan and Chardonnay.' Nick Gislason at Screaming Eagle remembers 2013 as a vintage where he was thankful to preside over such an over-resourced winery. But not all wineries were equipped to face these logistical pressures, so some were forced to harvest later than they might have wished.

The vintage's balmy conditions also offered almost unparalleled opportunities for intentional excess: winemakers could wait to harvest as long as they liked, exploring the

Photograph: Michael Sugrue

'A warm summer and early autumn led to an early harvest in ideal conditions'

Corison, Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley 2013 96

£75 **Roberson**

Beautifully perfumed aromas of rose petal, violets, blackberry, dark chocolate and incipient cigar tobacco burst from the glass in a striking array, the prelude to a wine that's structured around refined, savoury tannins and juicy acidity. An ethereal and classically proportioned Cabernet which will age effortlessly thanks to its flawless balance, likely putting on weight with bottle age. Terrific stuff; not to be missed.

Drink 2023-2064 **Alc** 13.5%



Diamond Creek, Gravelly Meadow, Napa Valley 2013 96

£132 **Armit Wines, Turville Valley Wines**

Notes of cassis, rich earth and pencil shavings lead into a

seamless, elegant but authoritative wine that nods to the Médoc. This is the most refined of the Diamond Creek bottlings, hailing, as its name suggests, from dry-farmed vines growing in deep gravel soils. **Drink** 2020-2050 **Alc** 14.5%

Vérité, Le Désir, Sonoma County 2013 96

£350 (2012) **Fells**

The most exotic and aromatically seductive of the Verité wines, wild red and black fruits marry with nuances of cigar tobacco and floral details. While similarly large-scaled, Le Désir's tannic structure is more supple than that of its siblings and its palate presence appealingly energetic. A blend of 62% Cabernet Franc, 22% Merlot, 11% Cabernet Sauvignon and the balance Malbec.

Drink 2020-2045 **Alc** 14.2%

Mount Eden Vineyards, Cabernet Sauvignon, Santa Cruz Mountains 2013 95

POA **Roberson**

A true classic, bursting with red and black fruit, vine smoke and pencil shavings; structured by fine tannins and bracing Santa Cruz acidity. Consistently one of the most ageworthy Cabernets in California, gaining in volume and expansiveness with time in the cellar, always vibrant and intense. **Drink** 2023-2060 **Alc** 13.5%

Vérité, La Joie, Sonoma County 2013 95

£350 (2012) **Fells**

The most brooding and massive wine in the Verité portfolio. Creamy cassis, plum and graphite are followed by a large-scaled, dense, intensely concentrated and savoury wine which lives up to its reputation as Sonoma's answer to Pauillac. A blend of 71% Cabernet Sauvignon, 16% Merlot, 8% Cabernet Franc and 5% Petit Verdot. **Drink** 2023-2055 **Alc** 14.2% ➤

Opus One, Oakville, Napa Valley 2013 94
 POA **Berry Bros & Rudd, BI Wines, Fine & Rare, Harrods, Hedonism, Private Cellar, Woodwinters**
 Red and black fruit, graphite, incense and cedar meld together in a youthfully reserved bouquet that should blossom in bottle. On the palate, the 2013 is more seriously structured than its polished 2012 sibling, framed by savoury structuring tannins that are built for the cellar. The latest in a string of recent successes. **Drink** 2019-2035 **Alc** 14.5%

Ramey, Pedregal Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, Oakville, Napa Valley 2013 94
 POA **WoodWinters**
 The most exciting of Ramey's crop of 2013s, the Pedregal reveals a classic Oakville nose, with aromas of plush red and black fruits, liquorice and rich earth. These are the prelude to a modern but quite restrained style of Cabernet Sauvignon, that benefits from good acidity and refined tannins. **Drink** 2018-2030 **Alc** 14.5%

Inglenook, Rubicon, Rutherford, Napa Valley 2013 93
 £178 **BI Wines, Harrods, Hedonism**
 Juicy red fruit, spice and rich soil preface a savoury, fresh and elegantly medium-bodied wine that's cut from classical cloth. There is a lot to admire in the wine's balance and cut, but like its more modest sibling one wonders if the disposition of the site might be to produce something deeper and more intense? This is surely indicative of changes for the better at Inglenook, however. **Drink** 2018-2038 **Alc** 13.8%

O'Shaughnessy, Cabernet Sauvignon, Mount Vedeer, Napa Valley 2013 93
 POA **Harrods**
 Wild and briary aromas of blackberry, blackcurrant leaf, herbs and coniferous forest floor are replete with Mount Vedeer typicity. This attractive nose introduces a juicy, dense and richly textural Cabernet, that's ripe but still full of character. **Drink** 2016-2025 **Alc** 15.1%

Cakebread Cellars, Dancing Bear Ranch, Howell Mountain, Napa Valley 2013 92
 POA **Harrods**
 Notes of black raspberry, blackcurrant, roasted coffee and exotic spices meld in a heady, aromatic array on the nose. They are followed on the palate by a voluptuous and supple wine underpinned by the typical vigour of mountain tannins, and showing a bit more cut and vibrancy than Cakebread's other 2013 wines. **Drink** 2018-2025 **Alc** 15.1% ➤

Photograph: Clay McLachlan/Claypix.com

extremes of ripeness in an attempt to tame the year's intimidating tannins. After talk in the press about a movement to 'rein in ripeness' – an idea inculcated by the limitations which the cool 2010 and 2011 vintages imposed on growers and winemakers – 2012 and now 2013 are a resounding corrective; proof that the demise of high-octane Cabernet has been much exaggerated.

For now, the savoury complexity that distinguishes the 2013 vintage occludes many of the signatures of over-ripeness, but a surprising number of seemingly successful wines began to reveal a pruney, raisined – even oxidative – character when they were retasted 36 hours after opening. This bodes ill for their evolution in bottle, and it is clear that the year's extraordinary potential to create ageworthy wines which will gain nuance in the cellar was not universally realised.

Tannin talk

Another potential pitfall lay in the vintage's tannic concentration itself, a quality which required careful management in the winery: over-extraction was a very real danger, and – as with ripening – the real challenge in 2013 was knowing when to stop. 'It would be easy to have taken things too far in 2013,' reflects Mike Dunn, whose vineyards high on Howell Mountain produce firm, amply structured wines, even in lighter-styled vintages.

Still more importantly, the disposition of the vintage to produce deep, tannic and savoury wines was fundamentally at odds with many producers' desire to craft supple, immediately appealing wines of almost ➤



'2013 is undoubtedly the most tannic vintage of the new millennium'

Eric Baugher, Ridge Vineyards



Above: the Cabernet vineyards at Dancing Bear Ranch, owned by Cakebread Cellars, are planted on the slopes of Howell Mountain in Napa Valley

Dominus Estate, Napanook, Napa Valley 2013 92

£32.92-£42 (2012) **BI Wines, Harrods, Lay & Wheeler, Private Cellar, Roberson**

Red and black fruits, graphite and plum sauce introduce the most elegant rendition of this cuvée I've encountered. This is a serious wine, but will give more immediate gratification than its grander sibling. **Drink 2017-2027 Alc 15%**



Joseph Phelps, Insignia, Napa Valley 2013 92

POA **Berkmann, Harrods, Private Cellar, WoodWinters**

Brooding nose of black fruits, graphite,

vine smoke and toasty oak leading to a supple, savoury wine. Successful modern style; whether it will attain the magic of older Phelps wines remains to be seen. **Drink 2018-2030 Alc 14.5%**

Frog's Leap, Cabernet Sauvignon, Rutherford, Napa Valley 2013 91

£35-£43 **AG Wines, Hedonism, Highbury Vintners, WoodWinters**

Complex aromas of red berries, blackcurrant, bitter chocolate, mint and cedar leads to a savoury palate, revealing a sophisticated tannic chassis and bright acidity. One for old-school Napa Cab fans. **Drink 2019-2040 Alc 13.8%**

Foxglove, Cabernet Sauvignon, Central Coast 2013 90

£15.50-£17 **Bottle Apostle, Honest Grapes; Stannary St Wine Co, Uncorked, WoodWinters**

Does California produce a better Cabernet for the price? This unpretentious bottling from the Central Coast is beautifully pure and expressive, bursting with clean raspberry fruit and nicely balanced on the palate. The US needs more wines like this. **Drink 2016-2021 Alc 13.9%**

Snowden, The Ranch Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley 2013 90

£47 **Stannary St Wine Co**

Wild berry fruit and cedar are followed by a bright, crisp and texturally polished palate impression; purity is the theme, not power. **Drink 2016-2025 Alc 14.5%**

PlumpJack, Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Oakville, Napa Valley 2013 89

POA **Harrods**

Aromas of fresh red and black cherry, burning embers, and a gentle framing of new oak lead to a surprisingly fresh wine structured around firm tannins. **Drink 2016-2025 Alc 15.4%**

For full details of UK stockists, see p50



confectionary sweetness. Whereas the 2012 vintage lent itself to that style, 2013 did not.

There are ways, however, to force a square peg into a round hole, and the precipitous decline of several bottles of 2013 Cabernet Sauvignon a short time after opening may have something to do with winemaking practices (such as extended post-fermentation maceration and micro-oxygenation) intended to soften tannins, making wines more approachable in their youth.

So although the historic quality of the 2013 vintage is not in question, it is important to observe that the year was something of a high-wire act, at which not all producers

Above left: Dunn Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon 2013 from Howell Mountain is 'built for the long haul'

Above: Foxglove's vineyards in the Central Coast

'The hallmark of 2013 is a marriage of ripe fruit with savoury qualities that modern California Cabernet Sauvignon so frequently lacks'

enjoyed equal success; a fact that is in danger of being missed amidst the unqualified enthusiasm with which this undeniably great year has already been received. A rising tide, in other words, did not lift all boats.

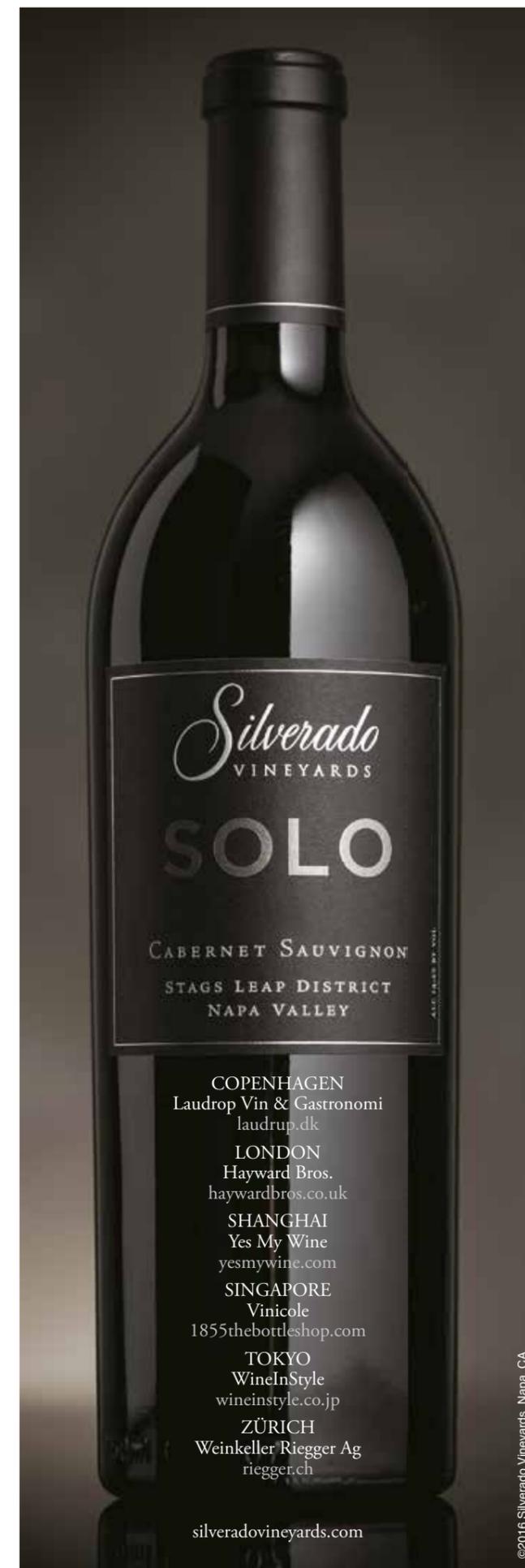
Most of the 2013 Cabernet Sauvignons, moreover, will be expensive. Producers across California, and above all in Napa Valley, have taken a widely acclaimed vintage as the cue to increase already lofty prices. What's more, keenly priced, drinkable, everyday wines continue to be deplorably hard to find; for although plenty of Cabernet producers aspire to challenge the Bordeaux first growths, few attempt to rival the crus bourgeois.

The vintage's many successes, however, will take a decade or more to unfold in the cellar and possess all the materials for extraordinary longevity and complexity. The best are truly wines for the ages, elevated to a rarefied level by their depth and savoury structure. And by and large, those who aspired to produce such wines enjoyed the greatest success. ■

William Kelley is a writer and aspiring winemaker who lives and works in Napa Valley



Above: PlumpJack Winery in Napa Valley's Oakville district



COPENHAGEN
Laudrop Vin & Gastronomi
laudrup.dk

LONDON
Hayward Bros.
haywardbros.co.uk

SHANGHAI
Yes My Wine
yesmywine.com

SINGAPORE
Vinicole
1855thebottleshop.com

TOKYO
WineInStyle
wineinstyle.co.jp

ZÜRICH
Weinkeller Riegger Ag
riegger.ch

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