

St. Helena Star

Panelists rank cabernet sauvignons from 2006

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FOR THE STAR

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As a group, we Americans don't drink very much wine — just over two gallons per person on average each year. That works out to about 64 glasses of wine every 12 months. Compare that with 54 gallons of soda and 30 gallons of coffee, and it seems even more surprising.

Of course, with all the great wine surrounding us in Napa Valley, our per capita consumption probably exceeds that of other counties in California, as well as other states across the country. Whatever the number of glasses of wine we drink, however, the main point is to make it count. We should drink wines that excite us, or intrigue us, or that make us stop and wonder what this whole winemaking thing is about.

The St. Helena Star and Napa Valley Vintners Tasting Panel recently tasted through 18 of the current 2006 vintage of cabernet sauvignon wines. Cabernet is still "Napa Valley's grape," the grape that — given Napa Valley's plentiful sunshine and ideal growing conditions — produces wines so intensely flavored yet wonderfully balanced, that wine lovers around the world take notice. But if you wanted to make it count — wanted to drink something that stands out among its peers, what would that be? The panel members got busy and answered just this very question. **Of the 2006 cabernet sauvignons tasted, there were several which stood out as "definitely worth it" wines.** Of three different flights of six wines each, **these three wines came in tops:**

The O'Shaughnessy Estate Winery Howell Mountain Cabernet Sauvignon (\$75) is a dark ruby wine with a concentrated nose of cassis, herbs, cocoa, earth and vanilla; a wine with great acidity, yet rich depth, making it delicious now but also worthy of aging. The family behind O'Shaughnessy Estate Winery knew the minute they put their hands in the soil of their soon-to-be property on Howell Mountain that this was the place for their grapes and their wines. They want one thing from their Howell Mountain cabernet sauvignon: for it to tell the story of Howell Mountain through its aromas and flavors.

Renteria Wines, Stags Leap, Cabernet Sauvignon (\$60) is an easy-to-love wine with intriguingly ripe berry, herbal and pencil lead notes followed by waves of fresh fruit balanced by deep fruitiness on the palate.

The Renteria family's roots are deeply nestled into the soils of Napa Valley. Salvador Renteria came from Mexico in 1962 and worked at Sterling Vineyards as vineyard worker, then vineyard supervisor. He followed Sterling with other stellar wineries such as Clos Pegase, Cuvaision and Silverado. After gaining a reputation for his wine growing, Salvador started his own vineyard management company and was later joined by his son, Oscar. After growing impeccable grapes for many of Napa valley's famous wineries for years, it is no wonder the family now produces a wine under their own label.

Coho Wines, Diamond Mountain, Cabernet Sauvignon (\$52) has aromas of eucalyptus and round, ripe berry flavors on the palate. This wine came in first against wines almost twice its price. Coho's 2006 is 100 percent cabernet sauvignon, rather than a blend as many were. The vineyard sits at an elevation of 1,800 feet and receives plenty of mountain top sunshine while also receiving cool afternoon breezes from the Russian River and Lake Sonoma. Coho owners Brooks Painter and Gary Lipp work with Susan Klopkas,

owner of Summit Vine Ranch, to bring in the fruit for this wine.

The panelists also rated the following wines for being beautifully balanced and delicious: The Girard Diamond Mountain District cabernet sauvignon (\$80), Highlands Reserve Howell Mountain cabernet sauvignon (\$55) and Balducci's Brenda's Vineyard cabernet sauvignon from Stags Leap (\$85). The Girard 2006 cabernet sauvignon from Diamond Mountain shows concentrated berry and caramel flavors with a touch of spice. This is a big wine, perfect for a big steak, or a slow roast with caramelized onions on the side. The Highlands Reserve is all ripe blackberry, chocolate and mint — a concentrated wine packed with hedonistic flavors. The Balducci cabernet sauvignon has very giving, concentrated berry flavors with a touch of tasty green olive. Pairing this wine with a serious roast, or meaty ribs, would make any dinner guest happy.

(Catherine Seda handles numerous international wine clients for Balzac Communications & Marketing in Napa. She is about to claim her diploma in Wine & Spirits from the WSET in London and writes about wine to share her love of the beverage. The wines tasted were provided by member wineries of the Napa Valley Vintners, the nonprofit trade association representing more than 300 wineries. Not all wines submitted are tasted. Many wineries offer local residents discounts on their wines through the Napa Neighbor program, visit www.napavintners.com /programs and click on Napa Neighbor to learn more. Consumption figures were taken from the Napa Valley Vintners Web site: www.napavintners.com.

For more details on the tasting, visit the St. Helena Star's Web site, www.sthelenastar.com on Saturday.)