

## Celebrating The Outstanding 2021 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignons

Tom Hyland :: 3/18/2025

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Nighttime harvesting at Acumen, Atlas Peak AVA, Napa Valley

Photo courtesy Acumen Vineyard

There are numerous grape varieties planted in Napa Valley, ranging from Pinot Noir and Sauvignon Blanc to Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Zinfandel. There are excellent wines produced every year from these cultivars, but the reality is that Cabernet Sauvignon is the King of Napa Valley, not only in terms of acres planted - more than 50% of the plantings in the valley are to this grape - but also in terms of press. It is Cabernet Sauvignon that was the foundation of Napa Valley glory more than a century ago, and it remains this way today.

So when there is an exceptional vintage for Cabernet Sauvignon in Napa Valley, you will hear a great deal about it. This has been the situation for the 2024 vintage for Cabernet Sauvignon in this area, a year that every producer agrees was special, resulting in wines of great complexity, density, harmony and aging potential.

I recently interviewed four Napa Valley winemakers, known for their distinctive offerings of Cabernet Sauvignon; I then tasted one or more of their Cabernet Sauvignons from 2021. Here are the three questions I asked each individual:

**What made the 2021 growing season in Napa so special? When did you harvest? Was this a normal size crop, smaller or larger?**

**How do you describe the finished wines in terms of aromatics, tannins, acidity harmony, texture, concentration, etc.?**

**How would you rate the 2021 vintage? How long will these wines age? Is there a recent vintage you can compare to 2021?**

Here are their answers, followed by my tasting notes:

**Aron Weinkauff, Winemaker and Vineyard Manager, Spottswoode Estate Vineyard & Winery**

I think there were a few things that had their fingerprints all over the vintage. One, is that it was the second year of the most significant two-year period of drought in our recorded history. Water was scarce, people had learned a few lessons earlier in 2020 addressing the lack of rainfall, and the overall crop and berry size were quite small. Two, was that unlike both 2020 before it and 2022 after it, the post veraison (when the grapes change color on the vine, *ed.*) period was more moderate. We didn't have the extreme heat spells that can really challenge the vines during the post veraison period. The more moderate ripening conditions led to better vine health, cluster health, fruit freshness, color preservation and wine aromatics. We were harvesting between September 3 and 29. It had been a warm vintage overall, but the temperature moderated at the most important time.

It is a very classic vintage. We often have great concentration and texture, hallmarks of a warm climate, but we also have great aromatics and harmony. Being someone who stylistically favors a little bit more freshness and vibrancy and seeks to protect the beauty of the wine from the extreme heat, we were happy with how the vintage finished and how it has developed in barrel and now in bottle.

I hate to rate my vintages as I find joy and pleasure in each one, but I can also recognize that the 2021 is a great, classic vintage. These wines will age and evolve for 30 years easily, and as a vintage it shares some things in common with both 2018 and 2016, but those were still fairly different vintages overall.

**Spottswode Cabernet Sauvignon Family Estate Grown 2021** (St. Helena, Napa Valley) - Bright, deep purple; gorgeous aromas of black currant, myrtle, anise and violet. Medium-full ( a very reasonable 13.6% alcohol), this has beautiful ripeness and a rich mid-palate, backed by very good acidity; firm, but elegantly styled tannins and significant persistence. The finish displays notes of blackberries and cocoa powder. Spottswode is among the royalty of Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon producers, and this 2021 is among their most complex and harmonious ever. Peak in 18-25 years. (97)

### **Phillip Titus, Acumen Winemaker**

From a viticulturist's point of view, 2021 was not an ideal growing season. With drought conditions and only 10 inches of rain in most parts of Napa Valley for the second year in a row, most vineyards experienced some level of water and nutrient stress. The last time Napa Valley experienced these kinds of drought conditions were the growing seasons of 1976/1977 and 1977/1978. At least in 2021, most vineyards now have irrigation as apposed to 45 years ago. In addition to the drought conditions, 2021 was a very warm growing season, adding more stress to the vines and grapes. All of this said, the 2021 growing season produced phenomenal wines on Atlas Peak, which I will discuss more below.

As we know, stress on grape vines can bring about positive side effects in the wine. On Atlas Peak, our Cabernet Sauvignon berries were tiny with thick skins and very little juice inside the berries. Yields were down but concentration was up with deep color and rich, luxurious flavors. Just as important, the structure of the wines is incredible with mouth-coating tannins and lush, deep berry flavors to balance out the tannins.

Our 2021 Acumen wines are profoundly concentrated with rich layers of fruit, spice and a dense tannic structure. In 2021, the challenge was to make balanced wines that still express a sense of terroir and harmony on a large and concentrated scale, which I believe we achieved. The wines from the 2021 vintage are already impressive in their youth, but they also possess the power and structure

to age for decades. With time in bottle, they will only continue to gain additional complexity and texture.

2021 will be considered a classic vintage for aging due to the concentration of flavor, color and tannin. For those who have the patience to age the wines, there will be great rewards in the future. In recent memory, 2021 reminds me of 2007 and 2013. These are wines that were enjoyable young but have paid dividends after a decade of more of cellaring.

**Acumen Cabernet Sauvignon Peak 2021** (Atlas Peak, Napa Valley) - 95% Cabernet Sauvignon, 5% Merlot, this is a blend of fruit from two vineyards 2500 feet above the Napa Valley floor; the wine was aged in 75% new oak. Bright, deep purple; intoxicating aromas of cocoa powder, black currant, anise and lavender. Full-bodied (14.5%), with a deeply layered mid-palate, there is outstanding ripeness, very good acidity, rich tannins and excellent persistence. This is a beautifully structured, tightly wound Cabernet Sauvignon with superb varietal purity and a distinct savory quality. This is an example of Napa Valley lushness with a European vitality, all the time displaying amazing harmony. As striking as the wine is now, this needs a little time to display more of its character and complexities; peak drinking in 15-25 years. (96)



Peter Heitz, winemaker, Turnbull

Photo courtesy Turnbull

**Turnbull Winemaker Peter Heitz**

The low-yielding 2021 vintage unfolded beautifully, with a moderate growing season, minimal heat events and a long, stable weather pattern. Here at Turnbull, our four estate vineyards (three in Oakville and one in Calistoga) were picked from September 8<sup>th</sup> through October 5<sup>th</sup>. The resulting wines detail why 2021 is a fantastic vintage—they are delicious and fascinating, seamlessly combining power with grace, restraint and a terroir-driven complexity.

Exceptional wines have an aromatic appeal that draws the taster into the glass, and our 2021s do just that. They have a natural purity and lift that shines forth with dimpled tannins and exciting structural elements. This is particularly true of our 2021 Cabernets, where the tannins and structure frame and lend velocity to the luxurious fruit.

The 2021 vintage is exceptional. The vintage has already locked in on its stunning potential. Excitingly, these wines should continue to deliver for decades. Other halo vintages in the last few decades that reached similar heights include 2007, 2013 and 2019.

**Turnbull Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville Reserve 2021** (Oakville, Napa Valley) - Bright, deep ruby red/light purple; aromas of black currant, red cherry, red plum and violet. Medium-full with excellent depth of fruit, perfectly ripe fruit, very good acidity, medium-full tannins that are well-balanced and restrained wood notes, The finish is lengthy and harmonious, with excellent fruit persistence. What is not impressive about this wine is its elegance, as every component is seamlessly assembled. This could be enjoyed with sirloin tonight or any time over the next 15-18 years. (95)

**Turnbull Estate Grown Cabernet Sauvignon “Black Label” 2021** (Oakville, Napa Valley) - Bright, medium deep purple; aromas of black currant, thistle, purple iris and a subtle note of black chocolate. Full-bodied with deep concentration, ample wood notes, good acidity, full-throttle tannins and excellent persistence. This is a powerhouse of a Cabernet Sauvignon that is very ripe and has a bit too much wood influence for my tastes, but others will love the intensity of this wine. Regardless, this is Napa Valley strength, a wine that demands time. Built for the long haul, this will peak in 18-20 years plus. (92)





Renée Ary, winemaker, Duckhorn Vineyards

Photo courtesy Duckhorn Vineyards

### **Renée Ary. Vice President of Winemaking, Napa Valley | Duckhorn Vineyards Winemaker**

2021 was a unique vintage in Napa Valley. It was the smallest crop I've seen in over two decades. We had eight inches of rainfall, with a typical year being well over 30. The dry winter in conjunction with a warm spring and less-than-ideal set yielded an early harvest and a very small crop. The result was small canopies and small berries, which in turn produced great concentration and balance. We started harvest on August 5th with Semillon from Napa Valley, and while we had some early heat, that was followed by a cool-down in September allowing for sugars and flavor development to align nicely. With a lighter crop overall, we were able to get everything picked off before some early rains came in October.

The 2021s are similar to the 2014s in a lot of ways. They have good concentration, energetic acidity and are quite refined. The tannins have broader shoulders than the 2014s, but they are nicely polished. Given the concentration of fruit, bright natural acidity and firm, balanced structures, I consider 2021 to be a great vintage for cellaring.

**Duckhorn Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon Rutherford 2021** (Rutherford, Napa Valley) - 96% Cabernet Sauvignon, 4% Merlot; aged for 16 months in 50% new oak, 50% neutral. Bright, medium deep purple; aromas of black raspberry, black currant, clove, licorice and purple iris. Medium-full, with excellent ripeness, very good acidity, well integrated wood notes, medium-full, sleek, almost velvety tannins and impressive persistence. This combines excellent varietal purity with outstanding harmony.

As appealing as this is now, this is an infant; give another 2-3 years to display great complexities; peak drinking in 15-18 years. (94)

**Duckhorn Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon Patzimar Vineyard 2021** (Napa Valley) - A blend of 77% Cabernet Sauvignon, 20% Merlot and 2% Cabernet Franc; the vineyard is at the base of Spring Mountain in the St. Helena appellation of Napa Valley. Matured for 18 months in 100% French oak; 85% new, 15% neutral. Bright, medium-deep purple; aromas of licorice, black currant, Damson plum and a hint of raspberry syrup. Medium-full, with excellent richness on the palate, notable ripeness, very good acidity, medium-full tannins and evident oak notes. There is excellent complexity and typicity, with distinct black spice and delicate green herb notes in the finish, along with a note of wild plum. Give this time to settle down; peak in 12-15 years. (93)

**Duckhorn Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon Stage Leap District 2021** (Stags Leap District, Napa Valley) - 100% Cabernet Sauvignon; aged in French oak (65% new, 35% neutral) for 16 months. Bright, intense purple; heady aromas of black cherry, black raspberry, lavender and a hint of clove. Medium-full, with excellent ripeness, there is a rich mid-palate, excellent persistence, very good acidity and well-integrated oak. The medium-weight tannins display the lovely suppleness and elegance of the Stags Leap District. I love the varietal purity as well as the sense of place with this wine. Give another two to three years to let the wine show its best character; peak in 12-18 years. (94)