Wine Spectator

#1 Wine of the Year

Wine Spectator, December 31, 2017-January 15, 2018
Napa First

This issue features our annual Top 100 Wines of the Year—the most exciting wines we blind-tasted among the nearly 17,000 new releases we reviewed in 2017.

The No. 1 wine in the 2017 Top 100 is Duckhorn's Merlot 2014 from Napa Valley's Three Palms vineyard. It's the second Merlot to be crowned Wine of the Year, following the Paloma Spring Mountain District 2001, which earned the top honor in 2003. Merlot may not have the stature of Cabernet Sauvignon or Pinot Noir in California, but when it's done right, it can be spectacular.

What makes the 2014 Duckhorn so special? First, of course, its quality. At a classic 95 points on our 100-point scale, it's the top-scoring California Merlot we reviewed this year.

Second, its relative value. In 2017, 14 Napa Valley reds earned classic scores (95 points or higher). At $98, this Merlot was one of only three to cost less than $100.

But most of all, we were impressed by the wine's X-factor—the story behind the bottle.

Dan and Margaret Duckhorn founded the winery in 1976, part of the wave of newcomers that followed the founding of Robert Mondavi Winery, established in 1966. Duckhorn made Merlot its specialty and from the beginning focused on one of Napa's most storied vineyards—Three Palms, near Calistoga, which was first planted in 1968.

Dan and Margaret sold their winery in 2007, but their departure didn't mean disruption. CEO Alex Ryan has been with the winery since 1988 and winemaker Renée Ary began in 2003. The buyers, Gil Partners, invested $70 million in the operation, including the purchase of the Three Palms Vineyard.

TSG Consumer Partners, a private equity group founded in 1987, acquired Duckhorn in 2016. They have invested in a variety of consumer goods, from Famous Amos cookies to Voss water, and recently acquired Calera, a Central Coast Pinot Noir pioneer. Their stewardship is proof that family ownership is not a prerequisite to top quality.

World-class wine is the product of hard work, deep commitment and great vineyards. Duckhorn's Three Palms Merlot exemplifies all these qualities, and its 2014 vintage earns its place at the pinnacle.

We're sure that our readers are aware of the terrible wildfires that ravaged California in October. We've been following the story closely; you can find detailed reporting on WineSpectator.com, as well as a summary in the news section of this issue. Our thoughts are with all of those affected by the disaster.

December remains a season of celebration nonetheless, so to give you a head start on your holiday wine-shopping, this issue includes our recommendations for top U.S. sparkling wines and a roundup of 100 great values in styles to match any party menu.

We also congratulate Ste. Michelle Wine Estates, commemorating 50 years of producing fine vinifera wines in Washington state and beyond. Editor at large Harvey Steiman traces the remarkable trajectory of this successful wine company.

There's plenty more to enjoy in this issue, from cheese to chocolate to books about wine. Every year has its happy memories, and its sorrowful ones. We hope 2017 has been good to you, and that 2018 will be even better.

Marvin R. Shanken
Editor and Publisher

Thomas Matthews
Executive Editor
The rejuvenation of a winery founded four decades ago (No. 1). A new estate created in an area where no vineyards existed (No. 41). A French red that leans toward Italy (No. 72).

These are just a few examples on the impressive list of wines whittled down from the thousands of bottles tasted by Wine Spectator editors in 2017.

Of the nearly 17,000 wines under review this year, more than 5,600 rated 90 points or higher on Wine Spectator's 100-point scale. From that starting point, we looked for wines that excelled in four criteria: quality (based on score), value (based on price), availability (based on cases either made or imported into the U.S.) and, most importantly, a compelling story behind the wine, something we call X-factor.

The result is our Top 100 of 2017, a group that includes time-tested vintners, new labels, up-and-coming regions and a diverse range of grape varieties—a microcosm of the wine world today. On this year's list, the average score is 93 points and the average price is $43.

This year's Top 100 features a strong showing of wines from the United States: nearly 25 percent are from California, augmented by selections from New York, Oregon and Washington. Overall, domestic wines account for one-third of our class of 2017, including the Wine of the Year.

For the third year in a row, the No. 1 wine is from California. It's the Duckhorn Merlot Napa Valley Three Palms Vineyard 2014, representing a comeback story starring a grape much maligned over the past decade. An in-depth profile of the wine and the people behind it begins on page 52.

Most of the list comes from three countries: the U.S., France and Italy. Cabernet led the way in California. New projects, including former sommelier Larry Stone's Lingua Franca and Louis Jadot's Résonance, generated excitement in Oregon. The 2015 vintage in France resulted in a strong presence from the Rhône Valley, Loire Valley and Burgundy. The Italian contingent hails primarily from Tuscany, supplemented by wines from eight other regions.
WINE OF THE YEAR

DUCKHORN
Merlot Napa Valley Three Palms Vineyard 2014

95 POINTS | $98 | 3,170 cases made

BY KIM MARCUS

Merlot is back, and deservedly so. Despite the comic derision heaped on the variety in the popular film Sideways, Merlot can make extraordinary wines in California. Duckhorn’s Three Palms bottling in the excellent 2014 vintage is ample proof.

Duckhorn Vineyards was founded in Napa Valley in 1976, and Merlot has been its specialty from the start. Since its first vintage, in 1978, the winery has tapped one of the valley’s most storied vineyards: Three Palms, named for the trio of palms that grow in its midst.

San Francisco socialite Lillie Hitchcock Cott owned the site in the late-19th century and planted the palms. But for Margaret and Dan Duckhorn, Three Palms was the anchor that helped them build one of Napa Valley’s most accomplished wineries.

Dan Duckhorn had been inspired to make Merlot after a trip in the mid-1970s to Bordeaux, where he was impressed by the grape’s approachability in comparison to the sometimes tannic characteristics of its sister Bordeaux variety Cabernet Sauvignon. The Duckhorns rode the boom in Merlot to financial success before the turn of the century, and weathered the fallout that followed the 2004 release of Sideways.

Their faith in the grape has been richly rewarded. The classic-scoring Duckhorn Merlot Napa Valley Three Palms Vineyard 2014 is Wine Spectator’s 2017 Wine of the Year. The 2014 Three Palms is an
elegant expression of Merlot, loaded with red fruit and spice flavors that are supported by medium-grained tannins.

Continuity has been the cornerstone of Duckhorn’s success, not only with the vineyard but also with its winemaking and management team. CEO and president Alex Ryan, 51, began working at the winery in 1988. Renée Ary, 41, started in the cellar, located off the Silverado Trail north of St. Helena, in 2003 and has been head winemaker since 2014, making this Wine of the Year honor an auspicious start to her tenure as the winery’s lead vintner.

For Ary, the Three Palms site is a somewhat counterruitive one for Merlot. It is one of the warmer areas in the valley, located just south of the town of Calistoga, whereas Merlot is typically grown in cooler conditions. Ary credits Three Palms’ pedigree to the rocky volcanic soils formed by an alluvial fan that forces the vines to set down deep roots, resulting in grapes bursting with concentrated fruit flavors.

“Three Palms is a unique site for Merlot,” Ary explains. “It’s warm and rocky, and you really have to be on top of things there because Merlot is susceptible to hydric stress,” which she manages through timely applications of water from drip irrigation.

And she respects the finicky nature of Merlot, from spring, when it is prone to poor fruit set, to harvest, when it can be damaged by rain and moisture because of its thin skin.

The 2014 Three Palms comprises 86 percent Merlot, 8 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 4 percent Malbec and 2 percent Petit Verdot. All the fruit for the wine comes from the 83-acre vineyard, 50 acres of which are planted to Merlot.

The 2014 was aged 18 months in French oak barrels, 75 percent of which were new. That regimen represents a shift by Ary from protocols that formerly saw 95 percent to 100 percent of the wine aged in new oak. “I’ve refined the barrel program quite a bit to polish the tannins up yet still give the wine the structure to age,” she says. Another practice Ary has instituted is to pre-soak the barrels in water to leach out green tannins from the oak.

The Duckhorns started their winery on a shoestring, financed by a small group of investors. They left day-to-day operations of the business in 2007, selling a controlling interest to GI Partners, a private equity firm based in Menlo Park, Calif., in a deal that valued their Duckhorn Wine Company at $250 million.

During its tenure, GI Partners invested $70 million in estate vineyard purchases, including the acquisition of Three Palms in 2015. It was bought from longtime owners John and Sloan Upton, brothers who originally planted the grapes in 1968; starting in 2011, Duckhorn had been the exclusive buyer of Three Palms grapes from the Upitons.

Duckhorn got a new owner last year, another Bay Area–based equity investment group, TSG Consumer Partners. Besides the namesake winery, Duckhorn Wine Co. also owns Goldeneye, which specializes in Pinot Noir; Migration, a Chardonnay label; Decoy for value-priced bottlings; Paraduxx, a lineup of Napa-grown red and white blends; and an expansion into Washington state Cabernet with Canvassback.

Overall, Duckhorn Wine Co. makes about 700,000 cases of wine a year. And this past summer it purchased Calera, a Pinot Noir pioneer on California’s Central Coast.

Tradition and innovation; continuity and transition. Duckhorn is a wine company on the move, built on Merlot grown around three of the most famous palm trees in the Golden State.