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By James Laube

Sauvignon Blanc has been part of the California landscape since the 1800s, but it wasn't until recently that it evolved into the remarkably versatile, food-friendly wine it is today. Its major breakthrough came in the 1970s, when Robert Mondavi in Napa Valley and David Stare at Dry Creek Vineyard (among others) began to treat the grape with greater respect and to focus on better-quality wines. Sauvignon Blanc's popularity then began to spread, as the wine appeared in a variety of styles from lean and flinty to sweet and fruity, with racy, grassy and even oaked versions that put the accent on buttery flavors.

While Dry Creek Vineyard emphasized Sauvignon Blanc's grassy, flinty attributes, Mondavi aged his Sauvignon in small French oak barrels and gave it a new name with a French twist, calling it Fumé Blanc (*fumé* meaning "smoked"). He and others began to promote the wine's flexibility, not only at the dinner table but also as a bona fide alternative to Chardonnay.

Today, California Sauvignon Blanc (or Fumé Blanc, as some labels have it) still lives in Chardonnay's shadow. Even devout Sauvignon drinkers would be hard-pressed to compile a list of outstanding bottlings that rivals the roster of top California Chardonnays. Perhaps the biggest reason for Sauvignon's shortcomings is that few wineries (or vineyard owners) put as much time and faith into Sauvignon as they do into Chardonnay. Though Sauvignon is tougher to grow, it can produce a huge crop; many growers love the grape for that very reason. Sometimes, though, overcropping can result in watery, weedy and overly herbaceous wines that are not very appealing.

Yet when it comes to value, Sauvignon outshines the rest of California's whites. Plenty of good-quality Sauvignons sell for \$12 or less, and many of the best can be found for under \$25.

If there's a word of caution about California Sauvignons, it is this: They are at their best when young and fresh -- aging rarely results in a friendlier wine. Indeed, if you wait too long, you run the risk of encountering a wine laden with herbaceous or vegetal notes that were lingering in the background when the wine was young, only to play a more dominant role with age.



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For a detailed tasting report of Sauvignon Blanc see the May 31, 2000 issue of Wine Spectator, page 36.

Top-Scoring Sauvignon Blanc From California

BRANDER Sauvignon Blanc Santa Ynez Valley au Naturel 1998

90 / \$30

Vibrant and tangy. Not weighty, but has tons of grass, lime, and gooseberry notes on a razor-sharp frame.-- *H.S.*

BRANDER Cuvee Natalie Santa Ynez Valley 1998

90 / \$14

Delicious, with Riesling-like floral and spice notes mingling with pear, mineral and citrus flavors.--*H.S.*

VOSS Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley 1998

90 / \$15

Aromas of passion fruit, fig and fresh-mowed hay. This is full-bodied yet light, its flavors ripe and fresh.-- *J.L.*

ARTESA Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley 1997

89 / \$15

Smooth, rich and elegant, with smoky pear, fig, melon and citrus flavors, this is tightly focused, long and complex.-- *J.L.*

Sauvignon's New Style

California Sauvignon Blanc brightens up with help from Down Under

By Jeff Morgan

A new style of Sauvignon Blanc is ascendant in California, and the results are impressive. Like many New Zealand Sauvignon Blancs, this newest crop from California serves up bright, forward citrus and passion fruit flavors with little or no oak influence. Inspired by the efforts of winemakers hailing from the Southern Hemisphere, the California wines are complex, yet at the same time light and refreshing.

This profile is reflected in some of my top-rated Sauvignon Blancs. Voss Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley 1997 (91, \$13), St. Supery Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley 1998 (91, \$12) and Geyser Peak Sauvignon Blanc Sonoma County 1998 (90, \$9), for example, were all made by Australian-born winemakers.

In contrast to this style are bottlings like those from Caymus and Matanzas Creek. These wineries make rounder, full-bodied wines, with flavors redolent of melon and fig framed with plenty of oak. Matanzas Creek Sauvignon Blanc Sonoma County 1997 (88, \$18) and Caymus Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley 1997 (88, \$14) exemplify this tradition, which has helped set the standard of quality over the last decade in California.

Either way, this year's tasting results indicate that there are plenty of high-quality wines to enjoy. Seventy-five percent of the 169 Sauvignon Blancs reviewed scored 85 points or higher on the *Wine Spectator* 100-point scale, the vast majority of them from the 1997 and 1998 vintages. California Sauvignon Blanc is also a haven for value hunters. Seven out of the 11 outstanding wines (scoring 90 points or more) cost less than \$15 each. At \$9, the 90-point Geyser Peak is the best buy of all.

Sauvignon Blanc typically is an assertive wine, fun for sipping but also well-suited to a variety of foods. Those wines made in a bright, tangy style are good matches for most seafood, but also can complement challenging vegetables such as asparagus and artichoke. The more full-bodied versions can easily go up against lighter meats, like pork and veal, as well as seafood.

Voss' Sauvignon Blanc, from Napa Valley, made a big splash in our blind tastings because of its highly unusual attributes. It displayed the effusive passion fruit and gooseberry aromas so common to New Zealand Sauvignon Blancs, yet it was also rich and full on the palate, reflecting its Napa Valley origin. Owned by Australia-based Samuel Smith & Son, Voss made its first Sauvignon Blanc in 1993 under the direction of winemaker Alan Hoey. Though a relative newcomer to California winemaking, Hoey has had extensive experience with Sauvignon Blanc in both New Zealand and his native Australia.

The winemaker has brought techniques to America that differ from those of many of his California colleagues. Among them is a method of enhancing fruit character by leaving the juice in contact with the grape skins for up to 24 hours prior to fermentation. The technique has long been abandoned by most U.S. winemakers because it is thought to promote early aging in white wines. But Hoey believes that this method is crucial, enabling him to pick the grapes when less ripe and still full of zingy acidity. "Too many California winemakers let their Sauvignon Blanc ripen too much," Hoey says. "It becomes honeyed. You lose the definition of the varietal."

Another outstanding wine made in this fresh, tangy style came from St. Supéry, which also produced very good wines in 1997. St. Supery Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley Dollarhide Ranch 1997 (89, \$13) and Napa Valley Meritage White 1997 (the latter a blend of 60 percent Semillon and 40 percent Sauvignon Blanc; 88, \$20) are both drinking quite well now. But the winery's latest release, the 91-point Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley 1998 (\$12), is its best wine to date. And with more than 31,000 cases made, there should be enough to go around.

Like Voss' Hoey and Geyser Peak's Daryl Groom, St. Supery winemaker Michael Scholz has brought his Australian sensibilities to California. Not surprisingly, he is fond of techniques similar to those practiced at Voss. "You have to commit to the style," Scholz says. "You can't go halfway. If you do, you lose the fruit."

Otherwise, the winemaking behind Voss, St. Supery and Geyser Peak Sauvignon Blancs is straightforward. The wines are not oaked. They are fermented in stainless steel tanks and bottled soon after harvest. This procedure is rapidly spreading in California, with even those winemakers formerly devoted to barrel fermentation changing their cellar practices.

"I started out barrel-fermenting everything," says Russian River Valley vintner Tom Rochioli, describing his techniques of 1985. "But now I've decreased it to 30 percent." Rochioli's Sauvignon Blanc is consistently among our top-scoring wines, and this year was no exception. His Russian River Valley Old Vines 1997 (93, \$22) is the highest-scoring wine in this report, and his Russian River Valley 1997 (91, \$14) is also impressive. Yet the bulk of Rochioli Sauvignon Blanc is now tank-fermented. "It gives it a fresher, crisper style," the winemaker explains.

Like Voss', Rochioli's Sauvignon Blanc is effusive in character, though a bit more complex. Both Rochioli wines are made from grapes grown at the Rochioli Vineyard in the Russian River Valley. In 1998, the two wines were blended for a single release, not yet reviewed.

In neighboring Napa Valley, vintner Mia Klein puts her own twist on barrel fermentation. Since 1992, Klein has made distinctive Sauvignon Blanc under her Selene label, and this year, Selene Carneros Hyde Vineyard 1997 (90, \$20) showed its usual finesse. Klein barrel-ferments all of her Sauvignon Blanc, but more than half the barrels are made of stainless steel, not wood. These small steel drums are the same size as oak barrels and permit significant contact between the maturing wine and the lees, or yeast sediments, that collect at the bottom of a barrel. For Klein, this is a key to making lush, silky-textured Sauvignon Blanc that nonetheless retains an appealing balance between ripeness and freshness.

Consumers intent on hunting down an appealing Sauvignon Blanc will be happy to note that it is made by reputable wineries throughout California. Besides the North Coast, both Monterey County and the Central Coast boast fine Sauvignon Blanc producers, with wineries such as Gainey, Bernardus, Brander, Babcock, Beckmen, Lockwood, Daniel Gehrs and newcomer Foley. Amador County can also make delicious Sauvignon Blanc, best demonstrated by Karly Sauvignon Blanc 1998 (89, \$10).

Yet despite a strong showing in this report, California Sauvignon Blanc could, and should, be even better than it is. After all, Sauvignon Blanc is the grape that gives backbone to great Bordeaux whites like Chateau Haut-Brion Blanc and Loire Valley wines like Didier Dagueneau's Pouilly-Fumé Pur Sang. There should be more than 11 outstanding Sauvignon Blancs in California.

Ironically, Sauvignon Blanc's progress here has been hurt by what would appear to be several of its strong points -- its climatic adaptability and its potential to produce a large crop.

The problem is twofold. First, there is the bottom line -- dollars and cents. Currently, the value of Sauvignon Blanc in California's high-end grape market is about half that of Chardonnay. That means growers need to produce more Sauvignon Blanc to make a comparable profit, so overcropping has become widespread throughout the state. "Overcropped vines produce wines that are washed out," says St. Supery's Scholz. "It cycles back to the public, and that's not good for the product's image." The vicious circle thus not only depresses grape prices, but hampers the variety's overall quality as a wine.

The second stumbling point results from Sauvignon Blanc's assertive character. Many winemakers fear the public will reject a white wine that is too aggressive. Why rock the boat when sophisticated winemaking and so-so grapes can yield a wine that's "good enough," and a quick sell at that? A few outstanding producers notwithstanding, many seem content with the status quo. Nevertheless, a demand for intense, outstanding Sauvignon Blanc certainly exists--witness the success of Rochioli, Selene, Voss or Geyser Peak.

Does Sauvignon Blanc age well? It certainly can. A few years ago, I enjoyed a Matanzas Creek Sauvignon Blanc Sonoma County 1985 from a magnum: At 10 years old, it was tremendous, still rich

and opulent while attractively earthy. Yet there are no guarantees in the cellar. The brightest, freshest styles are intended for early drinking, while some of the rounder, oak-influenced wines appear to have more staying power. But with the hot summer months upon us, a cool, refreshing California Sauvignon Blanc -- so deliciously expressive in its youth -- is a tempting prospect. In most cases, enjoy these wines sooner rather than later.

Jeff Morgan's Top-Scoring California Sauvignon Blancs

WINE / SCORE / PRICE

ROCHIOLI Sauvignon Blanc Russian River Valley Old Vines 1997 / 93 / \$22

Fragrant, with rich honeysuckle, fig, mint and herb, followed by citrus and a long finish. Sleek and firm.

ROCHIOLI Sauvignon Blanc Russian River Valley 1997 / 91 / \$14

Aromatic, with fig, fresh pea and herb. Balanced and rich, well oaked yet brimming with ripe fruit. Tangy, long finish.

ST. SUPERY Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley 1998 / 91 / \$12

Redolent of fig, peach and herb. Rich and ripe, with fresh grapefruit and melon carried brightly by tangy acidity.

VOSS Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley 1997 / 91 / \$13

Vibrant aromas of gooseberry and passion fruit herald a fresh, citrusy wine with complex flavors that last.