

A silhouette of a man sitting in a wooden chair on a porch, with a dog lying on his lap. The scene is set against a bright, hazy sky. The man is facing right, and the dog is also facing right. The porch railing is visible in the foreground. The overall mood is peaceful and nostalgic.

CALIFORNIA CLASSICISM

John Gilman argues that while over-the-top styles have alienated many fine-wine lovers recently, many of the old-school traditionalists are still worthy of their proud reputations, and a new generation of neo-classicists is ushering in a second golden age of California wine



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For the past 15 years, much of the colorful mosaic that is California wine has been lost in an obsession with new-oaky, high-alcohol, heavily manipulated wines that have garnered rave reviews and ridiculously high prices in many corners of the wine world but left a growing number of wine lovers utterly cold and mystified about the praise these behemoths have received. If one shaped one's perspective of the top wine regions in California by reading the favorable accounts in much of the wine press about these high-octane monsters, one could easily be tricked into thinking that this were the only game in town today. And many wine lovers struggling under that misapprehension have concluded that contemporary California wine is simply not for them.

When one digs a bit below the surface in California, one discovers that the monolithic front of modernity presented in many journalistic circles is not realistic, and that the West Coast is currently teeming with a sizable number of great producers of yesteryear—many of whom led California's climb to international wine prominence in the 1970s—who have not changed their stylistic predilections one iota as fashionable tastes have changed in the wine media, and who continue to make great, unmanipulated, and ageworthy wines in exactly the same mold as they did 35 years ago. Great old-school producers such as Heitz Wine Cellars, Mayacamas Vineyards, Stony Hill Vineyards, Kalin Cellars, Ridge Vineyards, Mount Eden Vineyards, Dunn Vineyards, and Joseph Swan Vineyards remain today at the top of their game and are currently fashioning some of the greatest wines in their illustrious histories. Even more exciting than the continued, under-the-radar excellence of these founding estates is the blossoming of a new generation of producers who have shunned the over-the-top, Mega Purple school of California winemaking and are producing wines cut very much in the mold of the state's early trailblazers. Very quietly, California winemaking looks to be entering a second renaissance, which seems just as likely to produce as many great wines as the "golden age" of the 1970s. For lovers of classically styled wines, it is high time to take notice of what is going on out west.

Trusting too much to technology

To understand a bit of the history of California wine and why the great wines of the 1970s eventually gave way to the overmanipulated, cookie-cutter, high-octane wines in most cellars by the early years of the new millennium, it is important to look back to the formative years of modern California wine in the 1960s. A very promising cottage industry in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it had its legs cut out from under it by the scourge of Prohibition in the 1920s and did not really start to recover until the early 1960s. Of course, there were producers who were already leading a return to serious wines long before then. Beaulieu Vineyards, Inglenook, Martin Ray Vineyards, Charles Krug Vineyards, Stony Hill Vineyards, and Souverain Cellars—to name only some of the most important producers of the 1940s and '50s—were the true pioneers in leading American wine out of the dark ages of Prohibition. But during their re-emergence in the postwar period, the true engine of the American wine business was still centered in

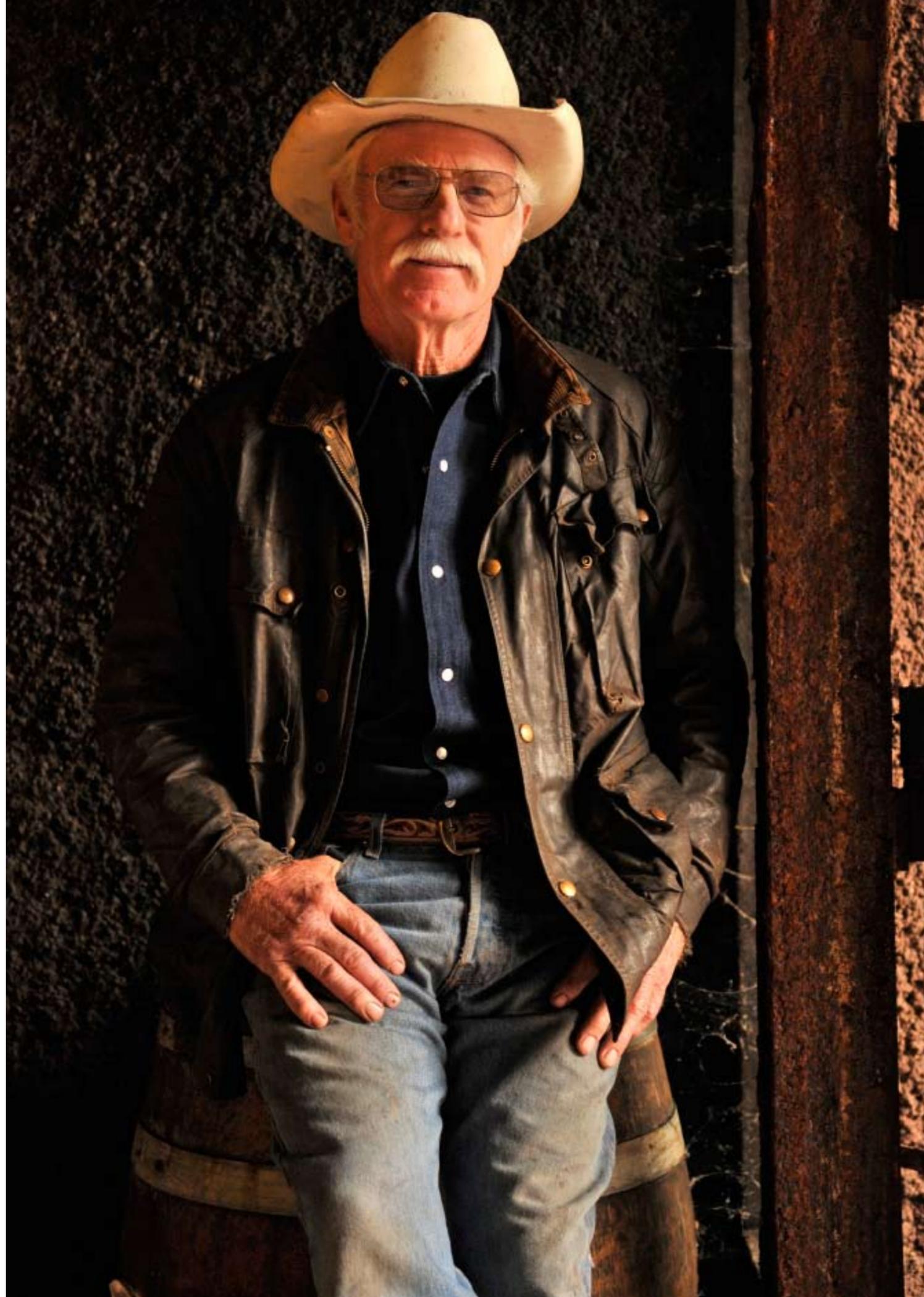
California's Central Valley, due to the huge jug-wine producers based there. The Central Valley's bulk-wine business was where the money was being made, and the high-quality producers of Napa Valley and the Santa Cruz Mountains were really only bit players on the periphery of California wine. But these estates planted the seeds for the wine revolution that began in the 1960s, as a new generation of quality-oriented estates emerged, including such seminal names as Heitz Wine Cellars, Ridge Vineyards, Mayacamas Vineyards, Robert Mondavi Vineyards, Chalone Vineyards, and Schramsberg. The (relative) collective success of this new generation of quality estates led in turn to another wave of producers in the early 1970s, with Joseph Swan Vineyards, Sterling Vineyards, Chateau Montelena, Clos du Val, Joseph Phelps Vineyards, and Stag's Leap Wine Cellars opening their doors or emerging as high-quality estates. Almost before we knew it, California winemaking was on the international map by the end of the decade.

But throughout the incubation of fine-wine production in California, the focus remained squarely on the winemaking side of the equation. Great emphasis was placed on science and technology during the winemaking process, to help California catch up with the great wine regions of Europe, which had a head start of more than a thousand years. Viticulture was in the backseat, while the newest winemaking techniques developed at UC Davis and Fresno State University were firmly behind the wheel. This focus on science produced the first generation of winemaking "superstars" in Napa, Sonoma, and the Santa Cruz Mountains. But as the trend continued, it eventually led to the winemaking excesses of today, which have resulted in a sad crop of highly manipulated and uninteresting wines. It began to be believed in many of the new wineries throughout California that there were shortcuts in the cellar that could ameliorate or completely undo the mistakes that were being made out in the vineyards at the time: grape varieties planted in patently unsuitable locations, the huge influx of very young-vine fruit on to the market, and so many new wineries relying on fruit purchased from growers whose overriding concern was to produce the highest possible yields from their most prized vineyard sites. It was a very dysfunctional viticultural situation, and the irony was that the problems out in the vineyards were not being acknowledged by the high-flying wineries or their fawning fans in the wine media. Sadly, they persisted in the mistaken belief that the problems could be solved in the winery, and the number of winemaking "fixes" grew as the 1980s and '90s rolled by.

With the arrival of phylloxera during the last decade of the 20th century, California fine-wine production was at a crossroads. On the one hand, the necessity to replant so many thousands of acres of vineyard land at least allowed the opportunity to undo the planting mistakes of the past and to get the proper grape varieties in the proper vineyard sites. However, this also meant that virtually everyone was going to have to find a solution for working with very young-vine

Randy Dunn of Dunn Vineyards on Howell Mountain, Napa Valley, graduated from UC Davis in the 1970s but still produces traditionally styled Cabernets

All photography by Jon Wyand, that on this and the following spread from Stephen Brook, *The Finest Wines of California* (Fine Wine Editions / Aurum and University of California Press, 2011)



fruit for the foreseeable future. Couple this with the costs of the huge replanting project, and one can certainly imagine that there were plenty of vigneron facing sleepless nights at this time. Seemingly, the solution settled upon at most wineries was to embrace the new paradigm of very high-alcohol wines, produced from very late-picked fruit, vinified with residual sugar even for purportedly “dry” styles, raised in lots of expensive new oak, and sprinkled with winemaking additives: coloring additives to give the desired neon-purple rim; powdered tannins to micromanage “mouthfeel”; maceration and extraction enzymes; engineered yeasts to provide a proper “boysenberry” fruit profile; powdered “oak add-ins” (heavily toasted or not)—these and myriad other winemaking products filled the shopping list of any aspiring winemaker looking to make a mark in this brave new age of California wine. Phenolic ripeness became the new mantra behind which all these manipulations would be concealed, since the overriding concern at many estates was to have enough sugar in the grapes to allow some to remain after fermentation to cover up the hole in the middle of the wine from all this young-vine fruit. One can understand the pressures that many producers faced at this time, but the solutions have clearly resulted in a lot of really bad and expensive wine. The blowback from clients who have put this stuff in their cellars could one day do decidedly more damage to the California wine market than phylloxera ever did.

Growing alternatives

This rapid historical review explains how most California wineries came to be where they are today and how their wines have become such alcoholic, syrupy concoctions in the process. What is also interesting—but beyond the scope of this piece—is how such patently absurd wines passed muster in wine-media circles. Be that as it may, the good news is that a decent number of producers never embarked on this dark path of over-the-top wines; or, having done so, decided that there were better directions to take. As already mentioned, many of the producers who resisted this new style of sweet and syrupy California wines were the pioneers who had ushered in the golden age of the 1970s. But the resisters also included later arrivals, such as Steve Edmunds of Edmunds St John, who had no interest in the new stylistic paradigm, and whose wines were pilloried in some corners of the wine press. Other producers, such as Ted Lemon at Littorai Vineyards, who cut his winemaking teeth in Burgundy in the early 1980s, were obviously not about to be tempted into the over-the-top camp. Add to this a growing number of quite new wineries—such as Rhys Vineyards in the Santa Cruz Mountains, Copain Cellars in the Russian River Valley, or Fred Scherrer in the quiet of Sonoma—and one quickly realizes that there are

now many addresses where one can find classic, old-school wines crafted for the cellar and destined to evolve gracefully.

What sets this school of classicists and neo-classicists apart from so many of their contemporaries in California? First and foremost, it is a desire to steer clear of the very high alcohol levels that are prevalent in so many California wines today. However, alcohol levels on the labels of California wines are neither very accurate nor a reliable indicator of the school to which a winery might belong. We are now in an age where a lot of water is routinely added to grape must at many wineries to bring down the high alcohol levels resulting from ridiculously overripe grapes. Hip winemakers in California derisively call this adding “Jesus units” to the must (literally turning water into wine). At the same time, the producers who are trying to keep the magic of world-class wines alive in California are working hard to keep their ripeness in check, allowing a significant soil signature to show through along with the lovely fruit tones of top California wines. Classicists and neo-classicists are also much less likely to whack their wines with a huge dollop of new oak, even if there are some pretty heavily

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oaked new wines (particularly Cabernets) from some of the old guard these days. But what really sets these old-school producers apart from their neighbors is that they are fashioning structured wines of balance and natural complexity that will repay cellaring by evolving into wines of greater distinction and harmony in the fullness of time. These are wines that are expected to start out life tight and reserved and in need of bottle age before they blossom.

Once upon a time, this was a given for all wines of serious pretension in California, but somehow this concept was lost at many addresses in the quest to make the new vintage taste as impressive as possible when the important wine critics came to call.

Happily, the number of California producers crafting wines for the cellar is growing, and there is a significant quantity of outstanding wine from this school today. These are producers whose wines will clearly prove a delight to wine lovers who never understood the hype surrounding the new-oak jam-juice school and heartily disliked those sweet and alcoholic wine cocktails masquerading as fine California wines. So, who are they? Pioneering producers who continue to craft classically styled wines and who are still at the top of their game, include Heitz Wine Cellars (celebrating 50 years of Napa winemaking excellence and reflecting their traditions all the way); Stony Hill Vineyards (the Chardonnays are every bit as good and ageworthy as they were back in 1974, and they now have a new Cabernet Sauvignon that must be one of the most traditionally styled on the West Coast); Terry Leighton's Kalin Cellars (so old school that it continues to hold back its wines for nearly a decade prior to release); Joseph Swan

Vineyards (everything here is excellent, but the Russian River Pinot Noir bottlings may well be the most Burgundian to be found anywhere in California today); Ridge Vineyards (particularly the glorious Cabernet Sauvignon bottlings, which even today, in this age of climate change, seldom cross the threshold of 13% ABV); Mount Eden Vineyards (long renowned for superb Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays but also home to one of California's longest-lived and stunning Cabernet Sauvignons); Edmunds St John (California paradise for Rhône varieties such as Syrah and Grenache-based blends); Mayacamas Vineyards (still producing the Château Latour of Napa Valley with completely unchanged, old-school, tannic Cabernet Sauvignons, not to mention one of the most sophisticated bottlings of Merlot this side of Pomerol); and Philip Togni (another old-school Cabernet producer of great merit). Ted Lemon's Littorai Vineyards is another name one can count on, year in and year out, to produce classic examples of Sonoma terroir with both Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. There are several other producers who cut their teeth in the 1970s and are still producing utterly classic wines, such as Cabernet maestro Cathy Corison at Corison Vineyards, or Williams Selyem (who came of age in the 1980s), but whose wines I have not had the pleasure to taste so frequently.

Add to this fine roster of veterans from the first golden age of California wine the neo-classicists who have arisen over the past decade or so, and one begins to understand that there are many exceptional options for lovers of traditionally styled wines who may have turned their backs on California. Kevin Harvey's Rhys Vineyards in the Santa Cruz Mountains is producing exquisite, very transparent examples of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Syrah. Kevin is a Burgundy lover par excellence, so it is not surprising that his own wines are comparatively low in alcohol (how about some Syrahs in the 12% range?), very soil specific, and quite modestly oaked. Alex Davis, after winemaking *stages* with Christophe Roumier and Marcel Guigal, is making terrific wines at his family's Porter Creek Vineyards in the Russian River Valley. Fred Scherrer of Scherrer Winery has only been on his own since 1998 but has fashioned some excellent old-school wines since he opened the doors of his own project, having been the winemaker at Dehlinger Vineyards for a decade. Jamie Kutch of Kutch Vineyards is also producing several lovely Pinot Noirs from Russian River Valley fruit. Over in Napa Valley, James Johnson Vineyards is offering some of the most interesting, lower-alcohol Cabernets outside pioneers such as Heitz Wine Cellars. There are other neo-classicists, such as Wind Gap and Arnot-Roberts, of whom I hear very good things but whose wines I do not know well enough to praise yet. I have little doubt that my list of classicists and neo-classicists is far from complete and that many other California producers are equally worthy of attention.

Perhaps the poster boy for the neo-classicist groundswell in California today is Wells Guthrie of Copain Wine Cellars. Having garnered plenty of accolades from some circles of the press in his early years with over-the-top wines, Wells has now jumped that (sinking?) ship and is producing beautiful wines of low alcohol, clear soil signatures, and exemplary potential

for the long term. When I asked Wells why he had changed direction so abruptly, he replied, “I had done several winemaking *stages* in France before settling down here [in Sonoma County] and had tasted a lot of great old wines from the likes of Chave, Jaboulet, and Verset [in the Rhône], Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, Dujac, and others [in Burgundy]. I kept wondering what on earth I was going to serve someone like Jean-Louis Chave or Jeremy Seysses [of Domaine Dujac] and not be embarrassed by the wine if they stopped by the winery for a visit and wanted to taste.” The wholesale stylistic change at Copain required seeking out cooler-climate sources (several



Bo Barrett, general manager of Chateau Montelena, cradling a bottle of the famous 1973 Chardonnay and still crafting wines destined for the cellar

in more northerly Mendocino County) for his Pinot Noir and Syrah, as well as convincing existing customers of the propriety of the change and turning his back on the easy money of high scores from cheerleaders in the press. But he concluded, “I knew deep down in my heart that I really needed to make a change in style—the happy result of which is that now my wife likes my wines, too, and is much more willing to drink them, rather than always suggesting a raid of the cellar for a bottle of old Barolo or Chave Hermitage! ■