

Delicious California Wines Don't Have to Cost a Fortune: Review

Spending an afternoon in a Sonoma Valley vineyard sipping from a heavenly \$450 bottle of Verite 2007 La Joie is hard to beat. Shelling out a tenth of that for something just as memorable is even better.

I recently sampled some of California's most sought-after - - and priciest -- cult wines. Among the highlights were a 2006 Cardinale Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$250) and the La Joie, both of which received perfect scores from Wine Enthusiast magazine and uber-critic Robert Parker.

All were delicious -- and unaffordable to the average wine drinker.

To find bottles that could stand in for their pricier counterparts, I asked sommeliers, vintners and fellow connoisseurs for recommendations. The wines had to be limited production, made with grapes from the same farms that cult producers use, or have a famous winemaker attached to the project. Plus, cost as close to \$50 as possible.

Petra Polakovicova, wine director at San Francisco's Epic Roasthouse, offered me several excellent choices. She first poured me a 2007 Fisticuffs Napa Cabernet (\$25), made by highly regarded winemaker Jeff Smith, who's better known for his Hourglass label (\$125).

Fisticuffs sells for \$65 at the restaurant, and less than half of that in shops.

"It's very well balanced, velvety on the palate and doesn't overpower you," Polakovicova said.

Coffee Flavor

Another wine she recommended was the 2006 B Cellars Oakville Cabernet Sauvignon (\$45) from Kirk Venge. This bottle presented ripe raspberries, sharp tannins, nice acidity and a roasted coffee flavor on the finish. A bigger pour was a 2005 Bridesmaid Proprietary Red (\$45), which displayed black fruit, smokiness and a tight structure with ample tannins.

"These are nice, lower priced wines, and people really buy them," Polakovicova said.

Smith said Napa vintners have generally ignored lower- priced quality wines. For instance, he said, cabernet sauvignons costing less than \$30 is a "wide-open" category.

After identifying several more bottles that met my criteria, I persuaded a friend to organize a dinner of game meats to showcase these wines. The three-course meal was a perfect setting for the big, lush, fruity wines I was seeking.

Blueberry Pie

For a first course of rabbit ragu, we tried Sol Rouge's 2006 Napa Cabernet Sauvignon (\$50), whose grapes come from the same farms that supply cult wines at triple the price. The sauvignon displayed flavors of blueberry pie, new leather and dark chocolate.

Another star from the first course was Newton Vineyards 2006 Unfiltered Cabernet Sauvignon (\$60). During an initial tasting, this bottle didn't immediately stand out among its lush, more tannic competitors. When paired with food, however, the wine shines. Many at the table said its wonderful acidity and earthiness provided a great match for the dish.

The 2006 Hoopes Oakville Cabernet Sauvignon (\$65) received a "yum" from one taster, and others noted its dense red fruit, ripe plums and dusty flavors mellowed as the night wore on.

For a second course of duck a l'orange, we tasted the Hall Napa Valley 2006 Kathryn Hall (\$75), a wine that received 96 of 100 points from Wine Spectator magazine. It showed a tightly wound core of red and black fruit, with cocoa notes on the finish. Nicely balanced and complex, it also comes from the first California winery to receive the industry's top environmental rating.

Screaming Eagle

The Jones Family Vineyards 2006 The Sisters Napa cab (\$60) blend also impressed the party with its bright tannins, milk chocolate notes, dried blackberries and hint of beef jerky on the finish. The wine was made by the grand dame of Napa winemaking, Heidi Peterson Barrett, who used to make the cult cab Screaming Eagle.

For a final course of grill-fired bison, sliced and served atop asparagus, we poured a Mirror 2006 Cabernet Sauvignon (\$75) from winemaker Rob Lawson. The wine's muscular tannins stood up to the beef, while flavors of blackberries and raspberries finished out the bottle.

Lawson also made another selection we paired with the last course, the Ghost Block 2006 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$50). This wine was a dense mixture of black fruits and sea salt, with a strong tannic backbone.

Here's the best part: Most of these wines are available with a little searching and are ready to drink now, unlike their more expensive competition.

Some wines mentioned in the story can only be purchased through the wineries. Others can be bought at online sites, including: www.cultwinecentral.com, <http://www.klwines.com>, <http://www.napacabs.com> and <http://www.wines.com>