



**LISA PERROTTI-BROWN**

31st Oct 2017 | [The Wine Advocate](#) | 233 (Oct '17)

Napa Valley is by nature undoubtedly one of the best suited regions for growing grapes and making wines on the planet. The growing season is usually dry and sunny, the soils are suitably varied and the landscape extends from bountiful valley floor up to rugged mountain tops, equating to a whole range of styles that can achieve the highest levels of quality. This said, there is no such thing as a “perfect” growing region. Winemaking is based on agriculture, after all, and until the day that man controls the weather (perish the thought!), annual growing season weather will remain the one variable beyond the winemaker’s control.

Having been a fan of Napa Valley wines for many years, I used to think that Napa winemakers were freakishly lucky, because this has to be one of the most consistent regions in the world in terms of overall wine greatness, year in and year out. After living here in Napa for over two years now, I’ve come to realize that Napa winemakers are not significantly luckier than those from other regions. But many are very, very good at making their own luck. Rather than elaborate further on this point, allow me to draw specific examples from recent vintages, focusing on 2015 in particular—as the 2015s are due to be released soon—with a general emphasis on Cabernet Sauvignon production.



*All photos taken by Lisa Perrotti-Brown, after the Labor Day heat wave in 2017. Top: Alison Tauziet, winemaker at Colgin Estate, shows off their shade cloth at IX Estate (09/20/17). Bottom Left: Cabernet bunch at Colgin IX Estate, Prichard Hill (09/20/17). Bottom Right: Cabernet bunch at Eisele Vineyard, Calistoga (09/19/17).*

## **2014**

2014 as a vintage was well covered by Robert Parker last year, so I'll just add a few comments based on my observations of the wines I've been tasting. Note that some of the 2014s are currently going through a bit of a closed/mute phase, making them a little difficult to judge in terms of aromatic profile, and therefore, it would probably be a good idea to give them a bit more time in bottle (see specific notes) prior to indulging. The best 2014 Cabernets are pretty and graceful, with finesse and delineation, while showing a bit more of the red fruit spectrum than is typical for Napa. This is a very consistent vintage, with the majority of the wines revealing lovely harmony and soft-spoken, earthy/savory, understated personalities. Some of the greatest wines possess an incredible "mineral" character, contributing an exciting and somewhat unexpected layer. One notable feature of this vintage for the major proportion of the wines I've tasted is the whopping great tannic backbones, offering firm yet wonderfully ripe tannins that take on a broadly chiseled, grainy texture as opposed to some of the more finely pixilated or even silt-like tannins that can be seen in the 2015s and 2016s. On the downside, less successful wines—though there were only a very few—seemed to struggle slightly with tannin ripeness, resulting in some relatively hard, chewy and astringent palates with drying finishes, especially when you consider that the fruit expression generally wasn't as generous as, say, 2013 or 2015.

## **2015**

2015 was the real “make your own luck” vintage out of this trio (2014-2016). By all accounts, it was the most stressful vintage for winemakers in Napa since 2011. Please do not race to conclusions here and think that stress = bad. On the contrary, as we all know from Viticulture 101, stress is great for vines, and apparently it is good for winemakers too.

Firstly, 2015 was among the “drought years,” but the winter rains were decent enough, with about 15 inches falling from December 2014 through February 2015, which was just enough to refresh the vines and give them a second wind to get through what was otherwise going to be another very dry year. The spring was indeed very dry, with only about two inches of rain in April and early May. As it turned out, this was not a bad thing, because the lack of spring water equated to less vegetative growth early in the year, getting the vine in balance for what was to come, i.e., the poor flowering and fruit set that is a recurring theme throughout the wine regions of Northern California and California Central Coast in 2015. March and April were fairly warm and so, as with the other regions, budbreak was early in Napa in 2015. But then everyone got caught-out by the cool spell that occurred in May and affected flowering. Note that in Napa, it was generally not so much of a bloodbath in terms of yields as it was for the Pinots on the other side of the Mayacamas. This said, the yields being down by as much as 30% in some Napa vineyards/areas is not uncommon.

2015 was a relatively warm summer here in Napa, with five days over 105 degrees Fahrenheit. Considering the relatively small crop set, the ripening race was on. During my conversations with winemakers, several commented that the biggest challenge in 2015 was trying to get ripe without going over-ripe; there wasn't as much of a window of opportunity with harvest as there normally is. And so, harvest was not only one of the earliest on record, but it was fast and furious. With some occurrences of berry shrivel, sunburn and uneven ripening, selection in the vineyards and winery was absolutely critical. This is where optical sorters truly came into their own, but I'm also a great believer that trained and highly skilled hand-sorting is also key. Although it must have been very difficult to toss away substandard fruit given the already low yields, the true quality-conscious wineries stood firm with their no-compromises approach, and this made all the difference.



*Harlan Vineyard in Napa Valley*

The best wines from 2015 are singular, totally unique expressions of their vineyards and are absolutely spectacular. Apart from very fine-grained, silt-like tannins and great freshness that structure the superlatives, it is the sheer range of aromas/flavors this vintage throws up that has me so impressed. In some wines, red, black and blue fruits can be found existing in more or less equal proportions and great harmony. The intensity of floral and spice perfumes that can be found is just astounding. Given the vintage, these characters have come as a wonderful surprise not just to me but to the winemakers as well. This is where Mother Nature truly does work in mysterious ways, but one theory I have has to do with the comments from a number of winemakers about particularly small berries this year and some uneven berry sizes within bunches, suggesting various stages of “ripeness” within the bunches. Normally this would raise alarm bells for winemakers, because the trend is to chase uniformity when it comes to ripeness. But too much uniformity can lead to wines that play a single note or a few similar notes rather than a whole symphony as we’re seeing in the greatest 2015 wines.

That’s the good news. The bad news is that not all winemakers were bent on making their own luck this year. There are also some growers/winemakers this vintage who got caught-out by the heat in the vineyards and/or weren’t so strict with their selections, and it shows in the wines. This manifested itself as baked berries/raisin characters and, in some cases, hard, unresolved tannins. For this reason, 2015 doesn’t appear to be as consistent in quality as 2013, 2014 or 2016, but the highs are certainly right up there with the best of those vintages.

## 2016

That there is nothing so very remarkable to say about the 2016 growing season kind of goes to show how relatively laid-back it was for winemakers, at least compared to 2015. It also explains why this vintage possesses the one key attribute that 2015 is lacking: consistency. It was one of those vintages where you had to be a really lousy winemaker not to make something good.

In most areas of Napa, 2016 was generally a cooler year than 2015, or 2014 for that matter. Please don't rush to think this was therefore a cool vintage. It wasn't. It was dry with a good amount of warmth, but none of the heat spikes experienced during the vintages on either side. The 2016 barrel tastings I've done so far reveal wines of great vibrancy and intensity, possessing lovely soft, ripe tannins and taut, muscular (but not skinny) fruit with compelling tension. What I love about the character of the 2016s is a kind of effortlessness about the wines—like a child possessing natural beauty from the get-go.



*Hess Vineyard in Napa Valley*

## 2017

I feel compelled to speak a bit about how the 2017 vintage is shaping up. I wouldn't ordinarily hazard comments on the vintage before all the fruit has even been harvested, but I've seen a few disparaging/sensationalist articles about the impact of the heat wave that occurred here over Labor Day weekend, which saw temperatures in St. Helena spike at around 112 degrees Fahrenheit, by my own calculation, whereas in Oak Knoll (where I live), it was closer to 108 Fahrenheit. The 100+

degree daytime temperatures held for a good three days, and the nights stayed hot. A few writers have got consumers thinking that most of California's grapes were reduced to raisins or that winemakers were in a panic, scrambling to haul in grapes that weren't ripe. From what I've seen and tasted here in Napa, these are exaggerations. After Labor Day weekend, most of the Cabernet bunches around Napa were still hanging on the vines for a few weeks yet, and for a number of Cabernet vineyards, the vintage is extending right into October (as I write). During my travels and winery visits, I did see some berry shrivel and sunburn, but not on such a scale as to cause alarm. A few relatively humid days occurred just after that heat wave and helped some berries and bunches to recover slightly.

Bottom line: the top wineries in Napa have the knowledge, skills and resources to protect and sort fruit, to mitigate such occurrences. Apart from judiciously applied drip irrigation, many vineyard managers are well accustomed to leaving canopy cover to protect bunches and/or have adapted their trellising systems (e.g., split canopies); some wineries have optimized row orientation to offer protection, and more and more are employing shade cloths to protect the bunches from direct sun during brief periods of intense heat. I can't possibly comment on the quality of the 2017 wines until I taste them, but what I will say is that from what I've seen, I have no reason to jump to any conclusions that this vintage in Napa will be sub-standard. This year got off to a good, healthy start with plenty of winter season water, and but for a few heat spikes, the growing season was warm, dry and pretty uneventful. Once again, ultimately, I can't say what the overall impact of the Labor Day heat wave will be on Napa's 2017s, but I urge readers not to underestimate the ability of this region's winemakers to make their own luck.

#### **Post Script**

Just as we are about to go to press with the Print Edition of Issue 233, Napa Valley and Sonoma County are experiencing the most devastating series of wildfires ever here. On the Napa side, parts of Atlas Peak, Soda Canyon, Oak Knoll, Stags Leap District and Calistoga have been completely destroyed. Although the extent of the damage won't be clear until the fires are out, at this stage we know Signorello Estate Winery (Oak Knoll) and Paradise Ridge Winery (Sonoma) have been destroyed. Regarding the Napa Valley vineyards not directly in danger of flames, smoke damage may be a concern, but from what I have seen here in Napa and from discussions with winemakers, all white grapes and most of the red had been harvested. However, power has been out in parts of the county for the last couple of days, and many winery employees have been unable to get to work. It is difficult to say to just what extent these circumstances will affect the quality of the 2017 vintage as it is being processed, but as the theme of this article suggests, Napa Valley winemakers are incredibly tenacious and resilient. So, rather than jump to hasty conclusions, I urge everyone to wait until barrel tastings are conducted next year before making early predictions about the quality of 2017. More on this [here](#).

<https://www.robertparker.com/articles/aowXJM35Kst3GM76X>

# 2016 Clos du Val • Proprietary Red Three Graces

Rating

**(95 - 97)+**

Release Price

**\$175**

Drink Date

**NA**

Reviewed by

[Lisa Perrotti-Brown](#)

Issue Date

31st Oct 2017

Source

[233, The Wine Advocate](#)

A barrel sample blended of 83% Cabernet Sauvignon, 16% Cabernet Franc and 1% Petit Verdot, the 2016 Proprietary Red Three Graces displays a very deep purple-black color and nose of fresh blackcurrants, black cherries and black plums plus suggestions of pencil shavings, bouquet garni, violets and tilled soil with a waft of cloves. Medium to full-bodied, the palate possesses great elegance, with a fine yet firm frame of very ripe, soft tannins and plenty of freshness to lift the youthful fruit layers, finishing with great length and depth.

# 2016 Clos du Val • Cabernet Sauvignon Hirondelle Estate

Rating

**(93 - 95)**

Release Price

**\$120**

Drink Date

**NA**

Reviewed by

[Lisa Perrotti-Brown](#)

Issue Date

31st Oct 2017

Source

[233, The Wine Advocate](#)

Very deep garnet-purple colored, the 2016 Cabernet Sauvignon Hirondelle Estate—a barrel sample—offers up exuberant notions of warm black cherries, fresh blackberries and plums with touches of Provence herbs, underbrush and cigar boxes plus a suggestion of menthol. Medium to full-bodied in the mouth, it delivers plenty of expressive black fruit, herbs and earth layers with a delicate frame of ripe tannins and a lively acid line, finishing long and fruity.

# 2015 Clos du Val • Cabernet Sauvignon

## Hirondelle Estate

Rating

**(93 - 95)**

Release Price

**NA**

Drink Date

**NA**

Reviewed by

[Lisa Perrotti-Brown](#)

Issue Date

31st Oct 2017

Source

[233, The Wine Advocate](#)

Deep garnet-purple colored, the 2015 Cabernet Sauvignon Hirondelle Estate (a barrel sample) has wonderfully pure crushed black currants and blackberries notes with suggestions of sandalwood, cigar box, allspice and cloves plus a touch of dusty earth. Full-bodied, rich, plush and compelling in its up-front generosity, it has a firm backbone of ripe, fine-grained tannins and seamless freshness, finishing on a spicy note.

# 2015 Clos du Val • Cabernet Franc

## Hirondelle Estate

Rating

**92**

Release Price

**\$100**

Drink Date

**2017 - 2029**

Reviewed by

[Lisa Perrotti-Brown](#)

Issue Date

31st Oct 2017

Source

[233, The Wine Advocate](#)

The 2015 Cabernet Franc Hirondelle Estate, containing 10% Cabernet Sauvignon, reveals a deep purple-black color and nose of warm red currants, kirsch and mulberries with hints of pencil shavings, bay leaves, red loam and charcuterie. Medium to full-bodied, the palate delivers plenty of red fruit and earthy flavors, with a chewy backbone and plenty of freshness, finishing long.

# 2016 Clos du Val • Cabernet Sauvignon

Rating

**(90 - 92)**

Release Price

**\$52**

Drink Date

**NA**

Reviewed by

[Lisa Perrotti-Brown](#)

Issue Date

31st Oct 2017

Source

[233, The Wine Advocate](#)

A barrel sample composed of 77% Cabernet Sauvignon, 11.5% Cabernet Franc, 8.5% Merlot and 3% Petit Verdot, the 2016 Cabernet Sauvignon reveals a very deep garnet-purple color with cedar and spice notes over a core of crushed blackberries, cassis and warm mulberries with touches of Chinese five spice and bay leaves, plus a hint of dried leaves. Medium to full-bodied with plenty of poise and finesse in the mouth, it features a fine-grained backbone and plenty of freshness with a lovely herbal lift on the finish.

# 2016 Clos du Val • Chardonnay Gran Val

## Vineyard

Rating

**(90 - 92)**

Release Price

**\$55**

Drink Date

**NA**

Reviewed by

[Lisa Perrotti-Brown](#)

Issue Date

31st Oct 2017

Source

[233, The Wine Advocate](#)

A barrel sample, the 2016 Chardonnay Gran Val Vineyard is a little cedar-forward at the moment, giving way to a fragrant core of ripe apricots, honeydew melon and orange blossoms with hints of toasted almonds and brioche. Medium to full-bodied with a lovely oiliness to the texture, it delivers mouth-filling stone fruit and melon flavors with a lively backbone and great length.

# 2016 Clos du Val • Pinot Noir Gran Val Vineyard

Rating

**(90 - 92)**

Release Price

**NA**

Drink Date

**NA**

Reviewed by

[Lisa Perrotti-Brown](#)

Issue Date

31st Oct 2017

Source

[233, The Wine Advocate](#)

A barrel sample, the 2016 Pinot Noir Gran Val Vineyard reveals a medium ruby-purple color and nose of mulberries, warm red currants and black cherries with hints of lavender, raspberry leaves, fertile loam and charcoal. Medium to full-bodied, it delivers plenty of expressive black and red berry notions, supported by chewy tannins and a lively backbone, finishing long and earthy.

# 2015 Clos du Val • Cabernet Sauvignon

Rating

**90**

Release Price

**\$52**

Drink Date

**2017 - 2025**

Reviewed by

[Lisa Perrotti-Brown](#)

Issue Date

31st Oct 2017

Source

[233, The Wine Advocate](#)

Deep garnet-purple colored, the 2015 Cabernet Sauvignon—a blend of 80% Cabernet Sauvignon, 12% Merlot and 8% Cabernet Franc—features notions of cassis, black cherries and plums with hints of damp earth and cigar box. Medium to full-bodied, it has appealing vibrancy and freshness in the mouth, with a chewy frame and good length.

# 2016 Clos du Val • Chardonnay

Rating

**88**

Release Price

**\$32**

Drink Date

**2017 - 2019**

Reviewed by

[Lisa Perrotti-Brown](#)

Issue Date

31st Oct 2017

Source

[233, The Wine Advocate](#)

Sporting ripe apples, spiced pears and green guava aromas with a candle wax and allspice undercurrent, the medium to full-bodied 2016 Chardonnay hits the palate with bold, oak-laced fruit, finishing long and spicy.

# 2016 Clos du Val • Pinot Noir

Rating

**87**

Release Price

**\$38**

Drink Date

**2017 - 2019**

Reviewed by

[Lisa Perrotti-Brown](#)

Issue Date

31st Oct 2017

Source

[233, The Wine Advocate](#)

Pale to medium ruby-purple in color, the 2016 Pinot Noir is redolent of crushed red and black cherries and red plums with hints of fungi and forest floor. Medium-bodied, soft, restrained and with a pleasant, earthy character in the mouth, it makes for a nice, savory example of a quaffing Pinot Noir.

<https://www.robertparker.com/search/wines?assignment=KtztQi4Ku3tetopfq&producer=Clos%20du%20Val>