



FROM KAREN MACNEIL

THE NEW SUPER SAUVIGNONS

By Karen MacNeil
May 6, 2022

One of the most exciting developments in wine over the last several years has been the emergence of a whole new class of California Sauvignon Blancs—wines that are bright, mineraly, sophisticated, and complex, often with a ravishing raciness and richness. I call them the Super Sauvignons and I first began writing about them in 2017. Be prepared; these wines are expensive. But in honor of International Sauvignon Blanc day (today), here's why they are different and so delicious (see the OverAchievers section for the wines that came out on top in our blind tasting).

To begin with, the Super Sauvignons aren't "green," vegetal, or simple; in fact, from grape growing through winemaking, they have almost nothing in common with California Sauvignon Blancs of the past several decades. The grapes for these wines are planted in better vineyard sites—in some cases, in sites that historically would have been reserved for Cabernet Sauvignon. And unlike in times past when Sauvignon Blanc often got "step-sister" treatment in the vineyard, grapes for these wines are lavished with Cabernet-like care.

The wines are also made in a more sophisticated manner. Many Sauvignons are quickly made in large stainless-steel tanks and then released on the market in under a year. The Super Sauvignons are generally made in multiple individual lots that might be fermented and/or aged in four or more types of vessels—concrete eggs, used oak barrels, small stainless-steel drums, and new oak barrels—and are then back-blended and aged. The wines often spend an extended time on the lees for added richness and mouthfeel.

And furthering the complexity, many Super Sauvignons incorporate small amounts of other varieties (notably Semillon), or other color mutations of itself (Sauvignon Gris), or other clonal selections like an especially aromatic version of Sauvignon Blanc called Sauvignon Musque (which is also now known as sauvignon blanc Clone 27).

Why these new Sauvignons are happening now, especially in Napa Valley, is a case study in the evolution of American wine culture. Maybe we've finally come to realize that great Sauvignon Blanc is a whole lot better than average-tasting Chardonnay. Or maybe there's a newfound appreciation for what it means for a wine to be "alive." (And what is Sauvignon Blanc if not energetic?)

The Super Sauvignons have taken a long time to get here—that's for sure. Sauvignon Blanc was first planted in California in the Livermore Valley in the 19th century thanks to newspaper journalist turned winemaker Charles Wetmore who, in the late 1870s, persuaded the California legislature to establish the state viticultural commission. As the commission's first president and CEO, Wetmore headed straight for the prestigious estates of Europe where he obtained cuttings, including cuttings of sauvignon blanc and Sémillon from no less than Bordeaux's Château d'Yquem. Those Sauvignon Blanc cuttings (now called clone 1) became the plant material for vineyards all over the state.

But dark days followed for the variety. Grown at high yields after Prohibition, it became the basis for innocuous sweet and dry jug "Sauterne" (spelled without the final 's' as it is in France). "Good Sauterne" (also called "Haut Sauterne") was said to be made by just a few wineries including Ingelnook, Larkmead, Eschol (now Trefethen), and ultimately, Robert Mondavi Winery, which, sensing a marketing opportunity to distinguish its dry version, rebranded it as "Fume Blanc," a reference to the Pouilly Fumé wines of the Loire Valley. And Mondavi still makes a very fine example, especially the Robert Mondavi Tokalon Vineyard "I Block" Fume Blanc, of which only a tiny amount is now made, given that the vines, planted in 1949, are the oldest sauvignon blanc vines in Napa Valley, and may well be the oldest Sauvignon Blanc in California.

In the end, I believe that all great wines are precise. Their flavors are not muddled or diffuse. Their flavors are exact and vivid. For me, no California white wines are more precise or more inspiring than the new Super Sauvignons.



— OVER — ACHIEVERS

The Super Sauvignons

Here are the six stellar wines that came out on top in our recent blind tasting of California's Super Sauvignons. See [The Blog](#) for descriptions.

ADAMVS 2017
(Napa Valley, CA) \$85
Extremely complex, rich, and refined with notes of chamomile, moss, pine forests, and botanicals.

LAIL "Georgia" Sauvignon Blanc 2019
(Napa Valley, CA) \$160
Beaming with energy and freshness. Every lemony thing in the world is here from lemon meringue pie to lemon curd to lemongrass.

ACCENDO Sauvignon Blanc 2020
(Napa Valley, CA) \$65
Off-the-charts in depth and intensity. A cool creamy core framed by lime and white pepper notes.

TURNBULL "Josephine" Sauvignon Blanc 2021
(Oakville, Napa Valley, CA) \$50
Gossamer, elegant, and lively. A beautiful progression from sage to lime to peach to lemongrass.

EISELE VINEYARD Sauvignon Blanc 2020
(Napa Valley, CA) \$120
Sleek, dramatic, and so much vivid energy it's gymnastic. Lime, peach and sage flavors coalesced.

SPOTTSWOODE "Mary's Block" Sauvignon Blanc 2020
(Napa Valley, CA) \$45
Lime zest and white pepper swirled together in a botanical kaleidoscope of vivid flavor.