

Tasting notes - Jax Vineyards and Hawkes Wine

I had the pleasure of tasting the 2017 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon by JAX Vineyards as well as the 2016 Alexander Valley Cabernet Sauvignon by HAWKES wine side-by-side. These two valleys of Northern California are home to vineyards that historically produce top quality and world class Cabernet Sauvignon. Both Valleys have volcanic soil and both valleys also have alluvial soils caused by the winter rains. Generally speaking the “gravely” make up of these soils (creating a very dry environment) produces very lush fruit with a lot of flavor extraction from the grapes due to the long dry ripening process. They are similar enough that it can be hard to pick out a Napa Valley Cab vs. an Alexander Valley Cab in a blind tasting. To me the small differences are hallmark to each valley and it can be hard to decide which style I like more. Although these differences are noticeable, that are not extreme, and the winemaking decisions can also play a big part in the differences of flavor.

Here are my notes on both wines followed by summation of why I think they are exceptional.

JAX Vineyards 2016 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon.

When looking at the wine turned on its side in the glass there is a deep ruby color that fades quickly to light ruby on the rim which would indicate a younger wine with no bottle. It would also indicate some lighter red fruit flavors in the mix. After spending some time in the glass this wine opened up beautifully with aromas of eucalyptus, menthol, and red and black berry jam. There were lighter aromas of fresh blackberry and raspberry. The smoothest part of the aroma came from the oak influence on the wine showing a hallmark Napa Valley style: Vanilla, toffee, nutmeg and sweet tobacco.

When tasting the wine the thing that stuck out to me was it's nice acidity. This wine has high alcohol (14.8%) and generally speaking a wine with that much alcohol will have lower acidity and sometimes lacking enough acid to keep the flavors afloat. This is because as the grape ripens longer on the vine the acidity in the grape is converted to sugar (which is converted to alcohol during fermentation). That is why when you see a wine with higher alcohol you can generally assume it was ripened for a long time and possibly expect a lower acid profile when you taste it. But, the JAX Napa Valley Cabernet was skillfully made and has just enough acidity to match up with the alcohol. This goes a long way bringing out not just all of the fruit flavors of the wine but specifically the red fruit flavors that you pick up. I was very happy to get red fruit notes from this wine after seeing that it was high alcohol. The red fruit flavor add so much dimension and further accentuates the smooth oak influence on the wine flavors. Sometimes, with too much dark fruit, the oak flavors can become heavy and muddy.

This wine is a great value and shows an understanding of how to manage alcohol and integrate that into wonderful flavors from both the grape and the oak. It is also immediately approachable right out of the bottle which is a huge feat for a wine with this many layers of flavor.

HAWKES Wine Vineyards 2016 Alexander Valley Cabernet Sauvignon.

This wine had a very similar color although it didn't fade on the rim quite as quickly which would point to some lush fruit flavors. With another year in the bottle (2016) I expected the wine to already have some great aromas and it did not disappoint. I was hit with a bouquet of peppercorn, mint, violet, blackberry, raspberry, and black cherry. I always found that Alexander Valley Cabernets were a little more aromatic on the front end of the wine than Napa Valley Cabernets and this seems to be the case here. The oak treatment on this wine may be different than the JAX, or at least the oak flavors are integrated differently here. There are pungent aromas of Cedar, cocoa, and smoke. My favorite parts of this wine are the light tertiary aromas (aromas from bottle aging) of leather and molasses that are wafting ever so lightly from the glass.

It was incredibly enjoyable to drink this wine. It needed a little more coaxing (meaning just some time to open up so that all of the aromas and flavors were present) but it truly did not disappoint. With high acidity, high tannin, high alcohol (although slightly lower than the JAX with 14%), rich fruit and a long finish, this wine is running on all cylinders but, craft-fully, everything about the wine is in balance. A skillfully made Cabernet that has hallmark Alexander Valley notes: the high aromatics and lush fruit. I really enjoyed the restraint on the oak influence with this wine. When a wine has such lush and dark fruit it is easy to have too much oak influence resulting in some muddy flavors but the wine maker here put a beautiful touch of oak on the wine that doesn't overpower.

Another great value, in my opinion. The wine is not overdone in the slightest (which can be a challenge with very ripe fruit) and the winemaker has skillfully shown how to accentuate the aromatics of Cabernet Sauvignon, even when the alcohol exceeds 14% (a lot of times with high alcohol the aromas of the wine are dominated by the alcoholic smell, but not here). There is layer upon layer of flavor here to follow down into the glass.

The takeaway.

These are, without a doubt, two fantastic wines. If all of the flavors listed above don't make you crave the wines then you just may not like Cabernet Sauvignon. What stands out the most about these wines, to me, is that they show some restraint. Both Napa Valley and Alexander Valley historically have producers that make wines which can be considered overdone. This is a matter of personal preference, of course, but the generally consensus for a while was that California Cabernets were too alcoholic, too big, and were given too much oak influence. With our climate and terror in Northern California the fruit is more likely than not going to come off the vine ripe and with lots of flavor compounds extracted from the skins. What is absolutely beautiful about these wines is that the winemakers have taken this big fruit and shown restraint in the winemaking so as to maximize the aromatics and add touches of red fruit and higher acid (or "high toned") flavors. This little bit of restraint goes a very long way with these wines and they are absolutely lovely to drink because of it. Both of these wines have nice, long, smooth finishes that are preceded by strong and complex up front flavors. My advice to you would be to pick up a bottle of each and enjoy them both for yourself, as I did. Until next time, Cheers!

-Stefan