

Sonoma and Napa get savvier



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Suddenly, everyone seems to be drinking California Sauvignon Blanc, and Alder has no idea why.

I try to keep up with as much of what's going on in the wine world as I can. I accomplish this by tasting widely, reading widely, and talking with my colleagues in the industry whenever the opportunity allows. While I think I'm far from masterful at such activities, I don't often find myself blindsided by emerging trends in the wine industry.

But in 2023, when according to the Silicon Valley Bank State of the Wine Industry Report California Sauvignon Blanc was the only grape variety that showed positive sales depletion growth (what distributors actually sell to their retailer or restaurant customers) over the prior year, I can honestly say I never saw that coming.

With that little statistic as the spark, suddenly news outlets within and outside the world of wine were reporting on the state-wide shortage of Sauvignon Blanc grapes, and the fact that bottles were flying off of shelves and wine lists everywhere.

And there I was, thinking to myself, 'Really?!'

Dan Petroski is the winemaker behind the Massican brand, which holds the distinction of being the sole white-wine-only producer in the red-dominated Napa Valley. His project was founded with the vision of producing Mediterranean-style wines from Italian grape varieties, primarily from Friuli.

'I had originally sourced Sauvignon Blanc to blend with Ribolla Gialla and Friulano for my flagship wine Annia, but something about the Sauvignon Blanc and its beautiful pungency kept jumping out of the blend and I decided to bottle it on its own', recounts Petroski. 'It quickly became my most sought-after wine. It sells out the quickest and is what everyone seems to be asking for.'



Dan Petroski of Massican in the Alta Vista Vineyard in Carneros, which grows some of his Sauvignon Blanc

Petroski, who is one of the savviest marketers in the wine business, has long been an observer of the rising popularity of white wines relative to red.

The world has been producing more white wine than red since 2013, and while red wine production looks to be decreasing globally, white continues to climb. According to the OIV, since 2002, white wine consumption in the US (where white wine has long been more popular than red) has consistently grown at a faster pace than red.

E & J Gallo's purchases this past summer of both Petroski's (relatively) tiny Massican brand and Rombauer, a juggernaut of California Chardonnay, surprised many, but are easier to understand in the context of such trends.

Wine.com carries more than 2,000 domestic and international Sauvignon Blancs. California makes up 28% of the site's overall offerings for the variety, led by producers such as Duckhorn, Joel Gott and Merry Edwards. According to site founder Michael Osborn, the variety has grown 9.72% in its share of overall sales volume and 19.5% in its share of overall value between 2021 and 2023.

Numbers, as they say, don't lie. Between 2015 and 2023 the amount of Sauvignon Blanc harvested in California increased 84% from 88,330 to 162,765 tons annually. In the same time period, the average price paid per ton grew from \$920 to \$1,131, a 23% increase. In the same period, Chardonnay saw a price increase of 30%, but the amount produced remained relatively flat.

'We've definitely seen Sauvignon Blanc become a major varietal in California in the last five years. It's now the primary "other white" grape variety', says Glenn Proctor, partner at Ciatti Company, the country's largest broker of wine and wine grapes. 'We see increased interest on the production side, as well as increased planting contracts. I've even heard people saying they're ready to graft over Zinfandel or Cabernet to Sauvignon Blanc.'

Farmers are practical folks. They plant what their customers are asking for, and they rip out and replace what they can't sell, or can't sell for as much money. Clearly, demand for Sauvignon Blanc has been growing at quite a clip.

'Whenever we have well-priced Sauvignon Blanc under \$30 on the shelf, it sells out', says Cara Patricia, co-proprietor of DecantSF, a wine store and tasting bar in San Francisco's South of Market district.

'Sav Blanc has kind of become shorthand for a lot of people as a crisp, easy to drink, fruity wine. I've definitely seen an increase in people asking for it.'



Cara Patricia (right) and her DecantSF business partner Simi Grewal

Many commentators have characterised the interest in California Sauvignon Blanc as an 'explosion'. Let's be clear, an 84% growth in harvest and a nearly 23% increase in average price is impressive, but overall sales numbers for Sauvignon Blanc haven't quite kept up that same pace.

In fact, 2022 (as reported by SVB in their 2023 report) was the only year in the past few years that showed positive sales growth for Sauvignon Blanc relative to other grape varieties. In 2021 and 2023, the numbers for Sauvignon Blanc's sales growth were -0.9% and -3% respectively. However, when rosé's counterpart numbers are -17% and Cabernet Sauvignon's are -7% (as they were in 2023) a drop of only 3% counts as a fairly strong showing.

Petroski for his part saw a huge spike in interest in Sauvignon Blanc during the first year or two of the pandemic, both on the part of consumers (measured by clicks on the keywords 'Sauvignon Blanc' that he had purchased on the Google Ads platform), and shortly thereafter by producers, who suddenly turned to online advertising and direct e-commerce sales when the country went into lockdown.

'I was paying pennies per click for Sauvignon Blanc ads in early 2020', says Petroski. 'By April or May, suddenly I was competing with all the big boys, and the ad rates were up between \$3 and \$5 per click. People were bidding on them like crazy.' The fact that Petroski suddenly had lots of competition and escalating ad prices meant the marketing departments at the largest producers were seeing significant returns on their efforts.

Petroski's theory is that during lockdown, people wanted inexpensive wines that they could drink every day and didn't have to think about.

'If you think about it, it's crisp, it's clear, it's bright, it's consistent – it feels healthier', says Petroski. 'No one complains about getting headaches from drinking white wine. It's lighter, it's lower alcohol, and it's cheaper.' Just the thing, apparently, for our long, lonely days of Zoom meetings back in those days.

Petroski also believes that demographic shifts may be playing in favour of the California version of this variety in particular. 'We have this younger generation, some of whom are starting to drink wine, and they don't really know much about New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc, because that boom happened before they were around', says Petroski. 'These new drinkers are also much more interested in the local and the domestic.'

Patricia had an intriguing alternative theory about Sauvignon Blanc's spike in sales, in particular from Napa: 'So when you think about the fall and winter of 2022, that's right when Napa would have been releasing its 2020 Cabernets, but because of the fires, the only wines that many producers would have been pushing that year were their Sauvignon Blancs.' She adds, 'I don't often go to visit wineries in Napa but when I'm sitting there in the tasting room and they've got a \$125 Cabernet and a \$35 Sauvignon Blanc, I can tell you that's the thing I'm going to buy.'

To be honest, California Sauvignon Blanc is not a category of wine that I have ever really been impressed with. In fact, given that it's the state's fifth most planted white variety (and probably third most bottled variety after Chardonnay and Pinot Gris, since the more plentiful plantings of Muscat and Colombari rarely make it into bottles on their own) I drink far less of it than I do Ribolla Gialla or Trousseau Rare, which barely show up in the state's harvest statistics.

Given all the buzz surrounding the category, I thought it was past due time for me to do some serious tasting and find out whether anything has really changed. To be clear, California makes a lot of Sauvignon Blanc, so I decided to focus on Napa and Sonoma for this report. I tasted 150 wines, primarily from the 2021 and 2022 vintages.

Before I get to my tasting notes, let me make a few observations. The predominant Napa style of Sauvignon Blanc has long been heavily influenced by two factors. First and perhaps most importantly was Robert Mondavi's visionary idea to release a barrel-aged Sauvignon Blanc under the name 'Fumé Blanc' in 1966 and charge more for this 'serious' version of Sauvignon Blanc. The considerable commercial success of this wine firmly cemented Napa's idea to model even its white winemaking traditions on Bordeaux.

Secondly, while many producers in Napa have long made Sauvignon Blancs, until 2002 they were mostly inexpensive wines that, by virtue of being for sale in the spring or early summer following harvest, produced the cash flow to cover expenses until the (typical) autumn release of a winery's red wines. But in 2002, Lail Vineyards was convinced by their winemaking consultant at the time, Philippe Melka, to make a luxury wine in the style of a fine dry white bordeaux.

Proprietor Robin Lail was initially hesitant, but tasting the wine shortly before it was due to be bottled she was so impressed that she was moved to name the Graves-style wine after her great-aunt Georgia E. Lail, and release the wine at the unprecedented price of \$75. Luxury Napa Sauvignon Blanc has been a thing ever since, much of it made in the barrel-fermented, lees-stirred, lees-aged style that Georgia popularised.

My tasting revealed that Napa has thankfully become much more adept at making barrel-fermented and aged Sauvignon Blanc. In the past, most of these wines tasted primarily of new oak rather than fruit. Most of the barrel-fermented wines I tasted for this report, even those using 100% new oak, were much more balanced than in the past. Winemakers have clearly figured out the right oak to use, and how to utilise lees-ageing and bâtonnage to much better effect.

While Sonoma producers have some of their own bottlings in the mould of white bordeaux, most are just as likely or even more likely to stick with tank-fermented, unoaked wines, or wines that utilise only neutral oak for ageing but with less bâtonnage, leading to something of a stylistic divide between the two counties.

Sonoma wines as a whole are fruitier and fresher. I won't go so far as to say they sit closer to a New Zealand style as they lean more towards lemon and grapefruit than that green-gooseberry brightness we have come to love from New Zealand.

Style isn't the only thing that separates the Napa and Sonoma wines. The average bottle price for the Sonoma Sauvignon Blancs recommended below hovers around \$39. The Napa bottles I selected cost \$63 on average. These are rather shocking numbers, despite the fact that these bottles may be representative of the best that each region has to offer.

If part of Sauvignon Blanc's appeal consists of being a less-expensive alternative to California Chardonnay, as prices climb north of \$40 it would seem difficult to maintain that allure.

'Like everything else in the market, we're starting to see a little softness for Sauvignon Blanc at the moment', says Proctor. 'We have to make sure we don't kill the golden goose. There are limits to what we can charge for this grape, and we're starting to see a maturity develop in this market. If we're not careful, whether it's grape prices or bottle prices, we're going to outprice our competition and consumers aren't going to pay.'

Given the number of Napa Sauvignon Blancs being sold for more than \$150 per bottle, clearly someone is willing to pay that price. But maybe that's just because they seem cheap compared with \$450 Cabernet Sauvignons.

My 45 top-scoring wines below are listed alphabetically by producer (sur)name but you can reorder them to suit.

Accendo Cellars Sauvignon Blanc 2022 Napa Valley **18**

Contains 19% Sémillon and 10% Sauvignon Musqué. Whole-cluster pressed, fermented and aged sur lie with weekly bâtonnage in new and used French oak barrels and stainless-steel drums. 543 cases made.

Smells of honey, white flowers and green apples. Flavours of lime pith, green apples, lemon oil and a touch of vanilla have a wonderful bright salinity and fantastic acidity. There's a faint chalky quality to the wine that lingers in the finish. Utterly delicious. (AY) 13.9%

Drink 2023 – 2027

\$75 RRP