

STIRRING THE LEES WITH JAMES MOLESWORTH

2018 Napa Cabernets Shine at Accendo, J.H. Wheeler and Trois Noix

Napa Valley veteran Bart Araujo and family are building an admirable track record with a trio of young wine labels

By James Molesworth

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Napa's Araujo clan is now based out of their Wheeler Farms facility on Zinfandel Lane in St. Helena, which they bought not long after selling their namesake estate. For more background on Bart and Daphne Araujo and their children Jaime and Greg, cycle back through my Winery Intel reports on both Accendo and Araujo Estate (the latter, along with Eisele Vineyard, was sold to Artémis Domaines in 2013).

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Wheeler Farms is home base for the Araujo family's lineup of Napa Cabernet labels, including Accendo, J.H. Wheeler and Trois Noix. (Adrien Gregorutti)

The Araujo family flagship is Accendo which, since its debut in 2013, has quietly set a very enviable track record: Its three most recently released vintages, 2015 through 2017, have all earned classic ratings of 95 points or better on Wine Spectator's 100-point scale.

Winemaker Nigel Kinsman fashions the fruit, sourced from a small cadre of Oakville vineyards. In 2018, the blend and sourcing changed a little bit, however, because the vintage provided a qualitative bounty of choices.

The blend is just 85 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, along with 11 percent Cab Franc and 4 percent Petit Verdot. The majority of fruit comes, as usual, from Vine Hill Ranch in Oakville and Sleeping Lady Vineyard in Yountville. But the Cabernet Franc is sourced from Diamond Mountain and the Petit Verdot from the former Abreu-farmed Thorevilos vineyard (now owned by Jack Bittner of Ovid).

"It's rare for us to have a wine that's less than 90 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, but the Franc in '18 was just amazing," says Bart.

"It really handles the heat better, and that's why you're seeing it more in the valley, both as standalone and in blends," adds Kinsman.

There are just fewer than 1,000 cases of the **2018 Accendo Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley** (\$360). Production could be up to 2,000 cases based on the fruit sourcing, but the selection here is always stringent. The wine shows its typically lush and alluring mouthfeel, with waves of pure, unadulterated cassis, plum and blackberry fruit that just won't quit. While persistent, the fruit does cede some ground though, allowing subtle alder, sage and licorice notes to slide in on the finish. It's a remarkably fine-grained wine that delivers a seductive late echo of warm loam. It's just a bit youthfully tight now unlike the more opulent '16 and flattering '17 wines were right away. And there's nothing wrong with that. This is another classic in the making (and set for an October 2021 release).

There is now a second wine here as well, though it's not strictly just from fruit culled out of the Accendo final blend. Instead, the blending for Accendo is done, and with the remaining lots, some may be included in the new Laurea bottling. The **2018 Laurea** (\$125, 645 cases made) is 95 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 4 percent Cabernet Franc and 1 percent Petit Verdot. It delivers lots of pure, charming cassis and cherry puree flavors, with a similarly seductive mouthfeel as the grand vin. But this is brighter, fresher and more approachable now in style. It's not shy with its fruit, but there's depth here, with a long anise and graphite edge on the finish. It's really lovely stuff.

Looking ahead, the Araujos will not be releasing a 2020, a decision more than a handful of top Cabernet producers have made due to the threat of smoke taint in the wines from the late-season wildfires.

"We vinified some fruit to see what it was like," says Bart. "The analysis said no [smoke taint]. But either way, we just didn't feel right and so we wound up leaving most of it on the vine."

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