



## SUNSET SIPPING

Have a glass of wine, watch a sunset and make new friends at a **Sunset Rooftop Mixer** from 7 to 10 p.m. Wednesday at the Hilton Washington Embassy Row Hotel, 2015 Massachusetts Ave. NW. Cost: \$10 (food and drinks at your own expense).

# SCOTT GREENBERG *Vine Guy*

## Dry Creek Valley's savvy cabs

Some of the best cabernets you never heard of — yet

So here I am, in the middle of a huge barrel room at a winery in Dry Creek Valley that has been temporarily converted into a makeshift wine-tasting pavilion. I am navigating the 40 or so wineries that are pouring samples of their current cabernet sauvignon bottlings. You read correctly: I said cabernet sauvignon wines. Dry Creek Valley, known for so many years for their prodigious zinfandels, is now squarely on the map with an array of world-class cabernet sauvignon wines.

Dry Creek Valley is located in the northern portion of Sonoma County, just to the west of Alexander Valley. It extends from Lake Sonoma at the northwest-ern point and runs south-easterly, where it joins the Russian River Valley at Healdsburg, one of the most charming towns in California.

More than 120 million years of geologic history in Dry Creek Valley contributes to a diverse topography containing an exceptional variety of soil types and microclimates. In addition, the 16 mile long and 2 mile wide valley is blessed with cooling breezes that come up from the coast in the morning and evening, and warm afternoons. The wind actually creates an interesting phenomenon known as "compression," which has a tendency to make the northern end of the valley hotter than the southern end.

Fred Payne, a winemaker at Michel-Schlumberger, believes that this combination of climate and terroir makes DCV "a winemaker's appellation," and contributes to the distinctive flavors of cherry/berry and spice found in most DCV cabernets.

Cabernet grapes made their debut in DCV in the mid-1970s, and even though Italian immigrants gave zinfandel a head start during the latter part of the 19th century, more acres are now planted to cabernet sauvignon than any other varietal in the valley. According to John Hawley, winemaker and owner of Hawley Winery, "a lot of great

fruit from DCV has been going into premium wines from California, but it never received the recognition it deserved."

But when grape prices dropped a few years back, it prompted a number of growers to start making their own DCV-designated cabernet sauvignon wines. I for one, am glad they did.

The good news is that DCV cabs represent a remarkable value for quality, age-worthy California cabernets. The bad news is, because they are still relatively unknown, they are available mostly through the individual winery's mailing lists (Web site information provided in the reviews). This can be very bad news if you happen to live in a state that restricts or prohibits direct shipment of wine.

Then why write about these wines? Because when they do hit the shelves of local retailers, you can be among the first to grab 'em. All wines listed below are from Dry Creek Valley, California. Retail prices are approximate.

### 2002 Dry Creek Vineyard cabernet sauvignon (\$21)

Made by one of the first wineries in DCV, this cabernet features scents of red licorice and red raspberry jam on the seductive nose. Full flavors of ripe black cherry, blackberry and bittersweet cocoa are enhanced by the delicate notes of vanilla and spice on the elegant finish. (www.drycreekvineyard.com)

### 2002 Hawley cabernet sauvignon (\$28)

This wine possesses a Bordeaux-esque nose of rich blackberry jam, vanilla and barnyard scents. Characteristic notes of cherry and red and black berry fruits plays off of the hints of black tea that sneak in on the tight finish. A year or two in the cellar would pay big dividends for this wine. (www.hawleywine.com)

### 2002 Mauritson cabernet sauvignon (\$31)

This is the first cabernet sauvignon from this winery and, while the grapes are not all from DCV, it displays enough of the classic DCV cherry/berry characteristics to warrant mention. Additional flavors of red licorice, cola and raspberries chime in as hints of earth and spice sneak in on the long finish. (www.mauritsonwines.com)

### 2002 Peterson Winery, Bradford Mountain Vineyard, cabernet sauvignon (\$30)

Scents of vanilla and ripe black cherries explode from the glass and lead to extraordinary flavors of black cherry, cassis and black raspberry that coat the entire tongue. The prominent tannins enhance the balance and accentuate the lush finish, featuring notes of cedar, vanilla and blackberries. (www.peterson-winery.com)

### 2004 De La Montanya Amigos Red Wine (\$40)

This wine is a blend of cabernet sauvignon, syrah and dedication — 25 percent of the proceeds



from the sale of this wine go to the farm workers who make up to five passes through the vineyards during harvest. The dedication shows up in the glass with concentrated flavors of blackberry jam, cassis, black raspberries and peppery notes on the long, elegant finish. (www.dlm-wine.com)

### 2002 Montemaggiore Superiore cabernet sauvignon (\$40)

A blend of 75 percent cabernet and 25 percent syrah gives this wine weight and depth. The nose exhibits characteristics of vanilla, cassis and blueberries that leads to intense flavors of blueberry, black cherry and rich chocolate. Hints of mint and spicy/peppery notes round out the silky finish, thanks to the soft tannins and remarkable structure. (www.montemaggiore.com)

So keep an eye out for the cabs of Dry Creek Valley. They won't be a secret much longer.



Got a wine you want to expose? E-mail me at [scott@vineguy.com](mailto:scott@vineguy.com)



## TASTINGS

### Pinot noir picks from California

By Pamela S. Busch  
Special to The Examiner

I have yet to discuss California pinot noir in this column. It isn't that I don't like them, but I think that a lot are way overpriced for what you get. That said, I've tasted a few recently that have really impressed me and made me want to rediscover this grape.

Pinot noir is made in the cooler parts of the California — cooler being a relative term, as there are not any regions there that are as cold as Burgundy or central Otago in New Zealand. Also, what marks California pinot noir is a bright fruit-forward character that is not only pleasant to drink, but coupled with the grape's high acidity, make it a great pairing with many foods.

There are differences between the appellations of course. I often find the pinot noirs from the Anderson Valley to be a little lighter, though not less complex, and have a fresh, ripe strawberry flavor. Russian River pinot noir is characterized more by raspberries, and Carneros by cherries. The wines from the Central Coast can be a bit more "stemmy," though they often have pronounced raspberry flavors.

Here are two from different areas that prove to pinot noir snobs that impressive pinot noir can be made in California.

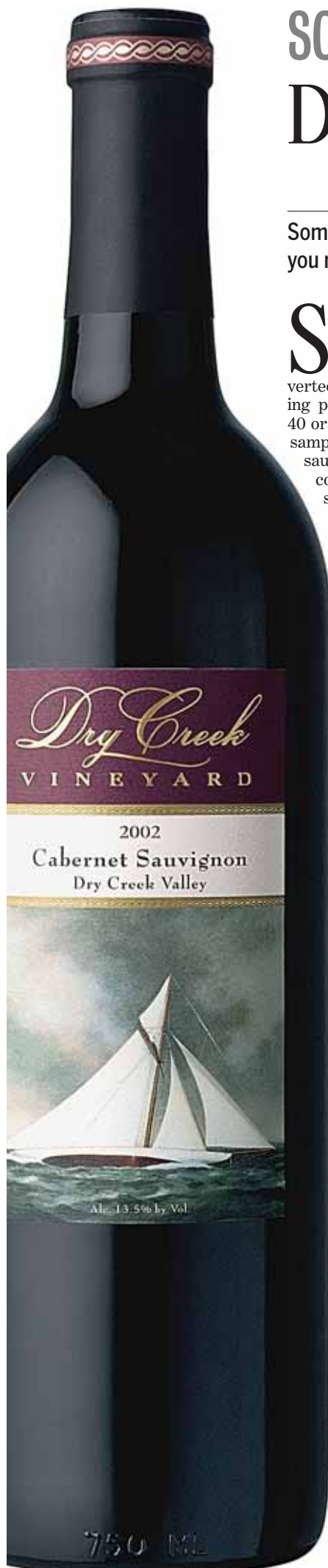
### 2004 Santa Barbara Winery, Central Coast (\$14)

Founded by Pierre Lafond in 1962, this was the first winery opened in Santa Barbara after prohibition. Made entirely from Monterey County fruit, this is a yummy little wine, with bright raspberry, cherry fruit, a hint of cocoa and mild tannins.



### 2003 Harrington pinot noir, Birkmyer Vineyard, Wild Horse Valley, Napa (\$24.99)

Bryan Harrington makes his wine in Berkeley. He has several pinot noirs, but the Birkmyer, from a vineyard east of the town of Napa, really grabbed me for its blend of earthy and licorice characteristics, reminiscent of Burgundy, and bright California berry fruit flavors.



This cabernet sauvignon has scents of red licorice and raspberry jam.