

BC GUILD OF WINE JUDGES

February 2023

CLASS E7 – DRY RED CABERNET SAUVIGNON

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INTRODUCTION

Cabernet Sauvignon (King Cabernet) is one of the major building blocks of Bordeaux wines. As such it is very popular with many winemakers and has been tasted previously by the Guild of Wine Judges in April 2022 and September 2019. The notes prepared in 2019 by the late Ron Rolleston are detailed and extensive and are considered a must-read for the February 2023 Tasting.

Arguably the world's most recognized red wine, Cabernet Sauvignon has become a favourite among seasoned oenophiles and newbies alike thanks to its rich and appealing flavours, full-bodied mouthfeel, and accessibility all over the world. Cabernet Sauvignon is dry red wine with high tannins and medium acidity. It is similar in style to other dry reds such as Merlot and Malbec but has a fullness that appeals to those who prefer full-bodied wines.

While Cabernet Sauvignon is grown in most wine areas of the world, this tasting has wines from only 3 continents. The emphasis for this tasting is on wines that are readily available locally from 5 wine regions exhibiting many types of quality and terroir (the combination of factors including soil, climate, and sunlight that gives wine grapes their distinctive character). There are examples from the northern and southern hemispheres, but all are new-world examples in the flight.

CLASS DESCRIPTION FROM BCAWA COMPETITION HANDBOOK

Class E7- Dry Red Cabernet Sauvignon

Wines in this class must contain at least 85% Cabernet Sauvignon.

Technical Characteristics:

Ingredients: Grapes Specific Gravity: 0.990 – 0.995 Acidity: 5.0g/L – 6.7g/L pH: 3.4 – 4.0. Alcohol is over 13.5%, with most Cabernet Sauvignons, especially those from places such as California, Australia and Chile, being more like 14.5% and sometimes even going over 15%.

Wine Characteristics

Cabernet sauvignon is a full-bodied red wine. It tops the list of robust red varietals, carrying some of the lushest, thickest sips that will coat most of the mouth and linger. Many describe Cabernet Sauvignon's body as unctuous, gravelly, rich and deep. The region the grapes grow in will also impact on the wine's body. Flavour includes black currant, cassis, plum, black cherry and spice. It can also be marked by herb, olive, mint, tobacco, cedar and anise, and ripe, jammy notes. It generally is accepted that oak improves it by softening tannins and imparting, woody, toasty, cedar, and vanilla characteristics.

REGIONS / COUNTRIES WHERE CABERNET SAUVIGNON IS GROWN

Cabernet Sauvignon is one of the world's most widely recognized red wine grape varieties. It is grown in nearly every major wine-producing country among a diverse spectrum of climates from Australia and British Columbia, Canada to Lebanon's Beqaa Valley. Cabernet Sauvignon became internationally recognized through its prominence in Bordeaux wines, where it is often blended with Merlot and Cabernet Franc. From France and Spain, the grape spread across Europe and to the New World where it found new homes in places like California's Santa Cruz Mountains, Paso Robles, Napa Valley, New Zealand's Hawke's Bay, South Africa's Stellenbosch region, Australia's Margaret River, McLaren Vale and Coonawarra regions, and Chile's Maipo Valley and Colchagua. For most of the 20th century, it was the world's most widely planted premium red wine grape until it was surpassed by Merlot in the 1990s. However, by 2015, Cabernet Sauvignon had once again become the most widely planted wine grape, with a total of 341,000 hectares (3,410 km²) under vine worldwide.

The Cabernet grape variety has thrived in a variety of vineyard soil types, making the consideration of soil less of a concern, particularly for New World winemakers. In Bordeaux, the soil aspect of *terroir* was historically an important consideration in determining which of the major Bordeaux grape varieties were planted. While Merlot seemed to thrive in clay- and limestone-based soils (such as those of the Right Bank regions of the Gironde estuary), Cabernet Sauvignon seemed to perform better in the gravel-based soil of the Médoc region on the Left Bank. The gravel soils offered the benefit of being well drained while absorbing and radiating heat to the vines, aiding ripening. Clay- and limestone-based soils are often cooler, allowing less heat to reach the vines, and delaying ripening. In regions where the climate is warmer, there is more emphasis on soil that is less fertile, which promotes less vigour in the vine, which can keep yields low. In the Napa Valley wine regions of Oakville and Rutherford, the soil is more alluvial and dusty. Rutherford Cabernet Sauvignon has been often quoted as giving a sense of *terroir* with a taste of "Rutherford dust". In the South Australian wine region of Coonawarra, Cabernet Sauvignon has produced vastly different results from grape vines planted in the region's terra rosa soil – so much so that the red soil is considered the "boundary" of the wine region.

VARIATIONS IN STYLE

The classic profile of Cabernet Sauvignon tends to be full-bodied wines with high tannins and noticeable acidity that contributes to the wine's aging potential. In cooler climates, Cabernet Sauvignon produces wines with blackcurrant notes that can be accompanied by green bell pepper notes, mint and cedar, which will all become more pronounced as the wine ages. In more moderate climates, the black currant notes are often seen with black cherry and black olive notes, while in very hot climates, the currant flavours can veer towards the over-ripe and "jammy" side. In parts of Australia, particularly the Coonawarra wine region of South Australia, Cabernet Sauvignon wines tend to have characteristic eucalyptus or menthol notes.

A couple of noted Cabernet Sauvignon flavours are intimately tied to viticultural and climate influences. The herbaceous or green bell pepper flavour is most widely recognized, caused by pyrazines, which are more prevalent in under-ripened grapes. Pyrazine compounds are present in all Cabernet Sauvignon grapes and are gradually destroyed by sunlight as the grape continues to ripen. To the human palate, this compound is detectable in wines with pyrazine levels as low as 2 nanograms (ng) per litre. At the time of *veraison*, when the grapes first start to ripen fully, there is the equivalent pyrazine level of 30 ng/L. In cooler climates such as British Columbia, getting Cabernet Sauvignon grapes to ripen fully to the point where pyrazine is not detected is

difficult. The green bell pepper flavour is not considered a wine fault, but it may not be desirable to all consumers' tastes. The California wine region of Monterey was noted in the late 20th century for its very vegetal Cabernet Sauvignon with pronounced green pepper flavour, earning the nickname "Monterey veggies". In addition to its cool climate, Monterey is also prone to being very windy, which can shut down the grape vines and further inhibit ripeness.

Two other well-known Cabernet Sauvignon flavours are mint and eucalyptus. Mint flavours are often associated with wine regions that are warm enough to have low pyrazine levels but are still generally cool, such as Australia's Coonawarra region and some areas of Washington State. Some believe that soil could also contribute to the minty notes since the flavour also appears in some wines from the Pauillac region but not from the similar climate of Margaux. Resinous Eucalyptus flavours tend to appear in regions that are habitats for the eucalyptus tree, such as California's Napa and Sonoma valleys and parts of Australia, but there has been no evidence to conclusively prove a direct link between the proximity of eucalyptus trees and the presence of that flavour in the wine.

One of the most noted traits of Cabernet Sauvignon is its affinity for oak, either during fermentation or in barrel aging. In addition to having a softening effect on the grape's naturally high tannins, the unique wood flavours of vanilla and baking spice complement the natural grape flavours of blackcurrant and tobacco.

The grape's true origins were discovered in 1996 with the use of DNA typing at the UC Davis Department of Viticulture and Enology by a team led by Dr. Carole Meredith. The DNA evidence determined that Cabernet Sauvignon was the offspring of Cabernet Franc and Sauvignon Blanc and was most likely a chance crossing that occurred in the 17th century. Before this discovery, this origin had been suspected from the similarity of the grapes' names and the fact that Cabernet Sauvignon shares similar aromas with both grapes such as the blackcurrant and pencil box aromas of Cabernet Franc and the grassiness of Sauvignon Blanc. In 2016, scientists at UC Davis announced they had sequenced a draft of the whole genome of the Cabernet Sauvignon grape, the first genome of a commercial wine-producing grape to be sequenced.

In addition to ripeness levels, the harvest yields can also have a strong influence on the resulting quality and flavours of Cabernet Sauvignon wine. The vine itself is prone to vigorous yields, particularly when planted on the vigorous SO4 rootstock. Excessive yields can result in less concentrated and flavorful wine with flavours more on the green or herbaceous side. The grapes' ripeness strongly influences Cabernet Sauvignon's style at harvest. When more on the unripe side, the grapes are high in pyrazines and will exhibit pronounced green bell peppers and vegetal flavours. When harvested overripe, the wines can taste jammy and may have aromas of stewed blackcurrants. Some winemakers choose to harvest their grapes at different ripeness levels to incorporate these different elements and potentially add some layer of complexity to the wine. When Cabernet Sauvignon is young, the wines typically exhibit strong fruit flavours of black cherries and plums. The aroma of blackcurrants is one of the most distinctive and characteristic elements of Cabernet Sauvignon that is present in virtually every style of the wine across the globe. Styles from various regions and producers may also have eucalyptus, mint and tobacco aromas. As the wines age, they can sometimes develop aromas associated with cedar, cigar boxes and pencil shavings. New World examples generally have more pronounced fruity notes, while Old World wines can be more austere with heightened earthy notes

FOOD PAIRINGS

Cabernet Sauvignon is a very bold and assertive wine that has the potential to overwhelm light and delicate dishes. The wine's high tannin content, oak influences, and high alcohol levels associated with many regional styles play important roles in influencing how well the wine matches different foods. When Cabernet Sauvignon is young, all those elements are at their peak, but as the wine ages, it mellows; possibilities for different food pairings open up. In most circumstances, matching the weight (alcohol level and body) of the wine to the heaviness of the food is an important consideration. Cabernet Sauvignons with high alcohol levels do not pair well with spicy foods due to hotness levels of capsaicin present in spices like chilli being enhanced by the alcohol with the heat accentuating the bitterness of the tannins. Milder spices, such as black pepper, pair better due to their ability to minimize the perception of tannins such as in the classic pairings of Cabernet Sauvignon with *steak au poivre* and pepper-crusted ahi tuna.

If relevant the different styles of Cabernet Sauvignon from other regions can also influence how well the wine matches up with certain foods. Old World wines like Bordeaux have earthier influences and will pair better with mushrooms. Wines from cooler climates that have noticeable vegetal notes can be balanced with vegetables and greens. New World wines, with bolder fruit flavours that may even be perceived as sweet, will pair well with bolder dishes that have lots of different flavour influences. While Cabernet Sauvignon has the potential to pair well with bitter dark chocolate, it will not pair well with sweeter styles such as milk chocolate. The wine can typically pair well with a variety of cheeses, such as Cheddar, mozzarella and Brie, but full-flavoured or blue cheeses will typically compete too much with the flavours of Cabernet Sauvignon to be a complementary pair into the class.

LIST OF REFERENCES

Various Google searches including Wikipedia as well as notes from the 2022 and 2019 Presentation Notes on the Guild website.