

California Classics Fifty Years On

A class of '72 tasting of California greats exposes several important lessons in wine aging.

[W. Blake Gray](#) Wednesday, 27-Jul-2022



© Trip Advisor | The turrets of Chateau Montelena are a nod to the old castles found in Europe.

The year 1972 was huge for California wine. At least eight wineries opened in Napa Valley alone – almost as many as in the previous decade.

It was an era for dreamers; also, prime agricultural land was affordable. Robert Mondavi had opened his own winery in 1966. Not only had it proved that California wine could be great; it served as a talent incubator for winemakers, many of whom played important roles in the Class of '72.

A "Class of '72" event was held last week at the Culinary Institute of America's Greystone campus, which in 1972 was the site of the Christian Brothers winery. Six wineries from the class took part: [Chateau Montelena](#), [Burgess Cellars](#), [Diamond Creek Vineyards](#) and [Stag's Leap Wine Cellars](#) from [Napa Valley](#) with [Jordan Vineyard](#) and [Dry Creek Vineyard](#) from [Sonoma County](#).

We had only one wine from 1972, but we had a number of wines from the '70s, '80s and '90s. If the purpose of the tasting was to show that [California](#) wines age well, it worked. I don't like to be one of those writers who tells you about some amazing wine that you can't possibly buy, so I won't give you tasting notes on the [1978 Jordan Cabernet Sauvignon](#) from magnum, but I will confess that I stole a glass from the CIA so I could

finish the wine that was in it. Good thing it wasn't the other CIA or I would be scratching this story out on the walls of a black site.

So much has changed in 50 years, yet something that these six wineries seem to share is a constant focus on making balanced wines, even when that wasn't popular in Northern California. That constancy is constantly under threat, though, as we move more than one generation past the founders. Three of them have been sold –? Stag's Leap is owned by a private equity firm that mainly owns clothing stores, Burgess is owned by an Arkansas agricultural magnate and Diamond Creek is owned by a [Champagne](#) company.

But in the case of Burgess, the 2020 sale to Gaylon Lawrence Jr., who also owns [Heitz Cellar](#), actually apparently brought the winery back to its traditional focus after a brief dalliance with the full-bore style.

Dave McIntyre of the Washington Post did a Class of '72 article in May and he pointed out several other members from Napa who weren't represented last week: [Caymus](#), [Silver Oak](#), [Clos du Val](#), [Mount Veeder Winery](#), [Rutherford Hill](#), [Smith-Madrone](#) and Sullivan Rutherford Estate. Lisa Mattson of Jordan, who organized the event, said that the participants were those who wanted to participate and had the older wines available to do so.

While tasting these delightful older wines, and hearing about how they were made, I kept wondering about the question for wine collectors that nobody wants to ask: How are the wines of today going to taste in 30 years? The world is warmer, so grapes are different. Winemaking is also different: it's more precise in almost every way. Wines are way more drinkable on release now than they were a generation ago. What will that mean for the future?

Example: we had two [Chardonnays](#) from Chateau Montelena: a 2019, and a 1990 from magnum. You might think the fresh young wine would be better, especially when you hear how they were made. But you'd be wrong.

"The winemaking has fundamentally changed," said Chateau Montelena winemaker Matthew Crafton. "In 1990 we weren't night harvesting. Everything went into gondolas, came up hot, and went into the equivalent of a giant Cuisinart."

Crafton said that [Chateau Montelena Chardonnays](#) from the 1970s are still drinking well today. His theory about why is that they used a lot more sulfites: three or four times what they use today.

I don't know a single winery today that brags, "We use a ton of sulfites so your wine will last decades!" But what if that was the key?

Golden oldies

The oldest wine we tasted was a 1972 [Cabernet Sauvignon](#) from Stag's Leap Wine Cellars. It needed to be drunk, but it was still alive 50 years later. Something I experienced with several of these wines was this: I couldn't taste the 2019 wine and imagine it becoming something like the 1972 eventually.

Luis Contreras is the assistant winemaker for Stag's Leap and has worked for the winery for 26 years.

"The winemaking technique was different back then," Contreras said. "We were adding stems back to the grapes. We were filtering before going to barrels. I don't want to say it's bad. It's just different. Now we're looking for technology to remove all those green stems. We want to have slow, cold fermentation. Technology has come a long way."

Yet in viticulture, it's back to the past. Kirk Grace, Stag's Leap's director of vineyard operations, said that he's taking some of the vineyards back to the "California sprawl" style, rather than the carefully trellised vines of recent years, because of climate change: he wants to keep hot sun off of the grapes, and he does not worry, as vignerons might have 50 years ago, about whether the grapes will get ripe.

Jordan is one of my favorite wineries that's difficult to write about because they only make two wines, a Cabernet Sauvignon and a Chardonnay, and they had the same winemaker for 43 years. You'd think they haven't changed at all. But like a duck paddling on a lake, they have been changing immensely for years without letting you see the effort.

Jordan was created to be an all-estate winery. But [Alexander Valley](#) eventually proved too warm for their Chardonnay. They also decided in 2006 that their hillside estate vineyards weren't producing fruit as good as what they could buy from vineyards in and around Geyserville.

"What we had been noticing on the hillside vineyards is that something wasn't quite right," Jordan vineyard relations manager Dana Grande said. "Some were great, but some didn't continue the optimism with which we had started."

So they dropped the estate concept, as painful as that was to do, in order to keep the wine consistent.

A number of years ago I sat on a panel with an East Coast writer who hates California wine to judge Sonoma County Cabernets. He was very negative about Jordan, which he thought was just fruity and had no complexity, and would not age. I defended the Jordan wines as being ready to drink right now. I thought about him when we tasted Jordan Cabernets from 1999 and 1978; they were lovely, and had aged as well as any of the wines we tasted last week. He was applying his idea of what ageworthy [Bordeaux](#) tasted like, and found that taste profile lacking in Sonoma County Cabernets. Well, he was wrong. But does that mean I know what an ageworthy Sonoma County Cab tastes like? I'm not sure, and it will take me 50 years to be certain.

One winery that intentionally made wines to age from the beginning is Diamond Creek Vineyards, which was sold in 2020 to [Maison Louis Roederer](#). The Champagne house should be a good owner because they understand wine. Will they make the wines friendlier on release? Of all the current releases we tasted, [2018 Diamond Creek Red Rock Terrace](#) was the least approachable. The 2001 from the same vineyard was still brooding and intense; formidable and pre-peak. The 1993 was lovely; one of the best wines we tasted. I interviewed Diamond Creek cofounder Boots Brounstein for Wine-Searcher in 2014 and she gave me a horizontal of the 2010 wines; this tasting makes me wonder if I will live long enough to drink them at their peak.

It also occurs to me that you can buy 25-year-old Diamond Creek wines via this website for less than the current releases: not the only Napa winery I can say that about. Older California wines may be some of the best values on the wine market.

The most unusual of the older wines we tasted was a 1994 Fumé Blanc from Dry Creek Vineyard. It was by far the oldest [Sauvignon Blanc](#) I've ever had and it tasted like asparagus and citrus; whether or not that's a good thing I don't know, but I would have liked to try it with asparagus.

"Our owners like to say that tasting old Sauvignon Blanc is like walking into an old Italian deli," said Dry Creek winemaker Tim Bell. "You get all those herbs and spices."

Bell said that the winery called it Fumé Blanc, a name Robert Mondavi invented, because of a test that Barney Fetzer of Fetzer Vineyards conducted.

"Barney Fetzer said they bottled the wine the same day as Sauvignon Blanc and Fumé Blanc," Bell said. "People said they preferred the Fumé Blanc, and said they'd pay more for it."

That was the spirit of '72: finding out what works. Much of it still works 50 years later.