

# Beyond Napa Cabs, Elevating Cepparello and a New Direction for Austrian Whites: Weekly Tasting Report

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413 TASTING NOTES

Thursday, Mar 27, 2025

The 2022 vintage is what's currently on offer for cabernet sauvignon and other Bordeaux varieties grown in Napa Valley, and our tastings over the past week continue to prove that most winemakers did yeoman's work in crafting very good to excellent wines despite the blistering heat dome in early September of that year.

Napa reds from Arietta, Stag's Leap Wine Cellars and Viader topped the 96 California wines that Executive Editor Jim Gordon and Associate Editor Andrii Stetsiuk tasted, with one wine in particular standing out because it is *not* a cabernet sauvignon. Rather, Arietta's Napa Valley Variation One 2022 is something much different: a blend of two-thirds syrah and a third merlot that is broad, plush and generous.

Fritz Hatton and Caren Frutig Hatton started Arietta in 1996, partnering with winemaker John Kongsgaard and Maggy Kongsgaard. They have relied on consulting winemaker Andy Erickson for the past 10 years to shape their mostly cool-climate reds and whites.

The Arietta H Block Hudson Vineyards 2022 is equally compelling. It's a deep, spicy, almost chewy red based on cabernet franc. Several other reds and whites provide a refreshing change from Napa's usual cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay.

Stag's Leap Wine Cellars has been firing on all cylinders in recent years – even making quite good wines in the smoke-haunted 2020 vintage – and proves its consistency again in 2022.

Three of winemaker Marcus Notaro's newly released reds earned 95-plus scores, with the iconic Stag's Leap Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Cask 23 2022 and Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley S.L.V. 2022 tantalizingly close in quality.

Also impressive among the top-scoring reds are two 2022 reds from Delia and Alan Viader. The seamless, layered and age-worthy Viader Napa Valley 2022, which is blended from 64 percent cabernet sauvignon and 36 percent cabernet franc, rated as highly as any California wine this week. The Viader Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Estate Limited Edition 2022 was nearly as impressive.

A brilliant chardonnay from Mayacamas Vineyards topped all the California whites this week. The Mayacamas Chardonnay Napa Valley Mount Veeder 2023 is fascinating now for its racy acidity, mineral, almond and green apple flavors but will mature and improve with time, as decades of past vintages have proven.

## Elevating Cepparello

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With the release of the 2021 vintage last year, the Isole e Olena Toscana Cepparello achieved an outstanding and unexpected result: the 100 percent sangiovese Super Tuscan earned an impressive 99-point rating and secured its place among the top 10 wines in our Top 100 Wines of Italy 2024 list. Last

week, as the 2022 vintage hit the market, Senior Editor Aldo Fiordelli had the chance to revisit the wine alongside the estate's director, Emanuele Reolon, doing a vertical tasting dating back to 2005 and uncovering a few technical details that support our high expectations for the wine.

Some might wonder how a Super Tuscan can be 100 percent sangiovese without adding international varieties to the blend, or why the Cepparello is not classified as a Chianti Classico given its origins in the heart of the region.

The answer lies in the unique nature of the Super Tuscan category, which emerged over 50 years ago with one core mission: to produce wines of exceptional quality beyond the confines of traditional regulations. While many of the most renowned Super Tuscans are blends of cabernet sauvignon and merlot, the movement was also about breaking free from outdated practices, such as the mandatory inclusion of white grapes in Chianti Classico blends in favor of sangiovese.

The Isole e Olena winery has been a pioneer in this philosophy since exclusively using the indigenous sangiovese grape for its Cepparello starting with the first vintage in 1980, following in the wake of MonteverGINE (Pergole Torte) Antinori (Tignanello).

The key technical shift that elevated Cepparello's style and quality in 2021 was the introduction of large casks (botti grandi) alongside the traditional tonneaux and barriques. While the wine continues to be fermented in oak, the aging process has moved toward a more restrained and traditional approach.

In 2022, the use of large casks increased, and by 2024, they accounted for 50 percent of production, which remains around 50,000 bottles annually. This change reflects the expertise of Pedro Parra, a leading terroir specialist from Chile who was brought in as a consultant after the estate was acquired in 2022 by the French luxury group EPI (who also own Charles Heidsieck and Biondi Santi). Parra's focus? Unlocking the full potential of the schist and limestone soils that lie at the heart of the Cepparello.

While the 2022 vintage doesn't deliver the same instant "wow" factor as the 2021, it remains a precise and layered wine, offering smoky and straw-like aromas, intense violets and bright red cherries alongside cherry stones and cedarwood. The palate is full-bodied and extracted, bursting with fruit sweetness, velvety tannins, and crisp, well-integrated acidity that extends the cherry-driven finish. Even in a challenging vintage, it's impressively polished. In addition, the label has undergone a light restyling.

Among older vintages, the 2015 still reflects the exuberance of a warm year, though bottle aging has begun to temper its intensity, revealing the first hints of elegant evolution. If you have one in your cellar, consider holding onto it a little longer – perhaps until next winter for an optimal drinking experience.

Flaws aside, the Cepparello remains one of the most important and compelling wines of the Chianti region – a label that commands respect both for its consistency and for its ongoing evolution. Its commitment to balance, terroir expression and precision winemaking makes it a wine to watch as it continues to redefine what a Super Tuscan sangiovese can be.

## **New Directions for Austrian Whites**

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The Austrian state of Burgenland is best known for being the place where Austria's best red wines are produced, and apart from some exciting chardonnays, dry whites have played second fiddle. Even the whites from the rather recently defined Leithaberg region within Burgenland didn't make a mark in the

way that the reds did.

For Senior Editor Stuart Pigott, there's no doubt why this is the case. The attempts by Burgenland producers to imitate the gruner veltliners of the Danube regions are seldom convincing and never exciting. The problem is not the grape variety – gruner is actually the most widely planted white grape in Burgenland – but a style of vinification that doesn't fit the warmer climate here.

In recent years, a number of producers have struck out in radically new directions with dry whites, most notably Moric, Schuster and Sommer. Just days ago Stuart was able to taste Leo Sommer's current releases, the recently bottled entry-level wines of the 2024 vintage and late-release 2023s.

None was more extraordinary than the Sommer Riesling Austria Handwerk 2023, which has a mind-blowing interplay of subtle peach aroma, flinty minerality and citrusy acidity. Although the wine feels almost weightless on the palate, it is deeply earthed at the incredibly complex, stony finish. It was wild fermented in a mix of old oak casks, one acacia wood cask and concrete eggs.

Sommer also has several no-less-original gruner veltliner wines, of which the Sommer Grüner Veltliner Austria Salz und Rauch Limited Edition 2023 is the most remarkable. Wild and intensely spicy on the compact and concentrated palate, it has great balance of creaminess from long sur lie maturation, fine tannins and flinty minerality.

Sommer's radical reinterpretation of the region's white wines is very new. "We changed a lot of things in the vineyard and cellar during the last five years, and the wines made a huge leap in their evolution with the 2022 and 2023 vintages," he explained. "Now we must take small steps and do fine tuning."

The other thing that stood out was the very solid quality of Sommer's 2024 entry-level wines. A large part of the Austrian wine harvest was hit by very heavy rain on Sept. 13 of that year. "We were able to time it just right," Leo Sommer explained, "and picked our last grapes – sauvignon blanc – around 6pm on Sept. 12, immediately before the heavy rain started." Scroll down to the tasting notes to find them.

Stuart also tasted the wines of a Canadian producer, Norman Hardie in Prince Edward County, a cool-climate wine region of Ontario. Hardie focuses on chardonnays and pinot noirs that are sleek with razor sharp definition. His chardonnays are particularly extraordinary and unique expressions of a grape that's grown all over Planet Wine.

The Norman Hardie Chardonnay Prince Edward County Unfiltered 2021 lies at the cool end of the chardonnay aroma spectrum with effusive lemon slice and leesy aromas. The amazing thing about this sleek and very focused wine is the intensity and length, given an alcoholic content of just 11.5 percent. Extending the sur lie barrel aging to extend over a second winter clearly helped Hardie nail this very daring style of chardonnay.

A shade more conventional in terms of weight, the Norman Hardie Chardonnay Prince Edward County Cuvée des Amis 2020 is richly textural and concentrated, yet only medium-bodied with a wonderful brightness and energy. At the finish it sails gracefully into the distance. This is a great example of how Burgundian inspiration can result in a wine that's totally original. Stuart knows all about that inspiration, having once met Hardie by chance on the Place Carnot, the central square of Burgundy's capital, Beaune.

In Hong Kong, we have started tasting and evaluating hundreds of Chilean wines, and many are exciting, great-value propositions, among them some refreshingly drinkable carignan, cinsault and país from Maule, in Chile's Central Valley, as well as from Itata.

But two standouts came from the Ritual winery, which has made some of the best wines from the relatively cooler, foggier Casablanca Valley, which is about 40 kilometers from the coast and has been battling drought issues over the last couple of years. The lack of water has endangered local viticulture and prompted several wineries to reconsider their investments. However, tastings of the Ritual Chardonnay Valle de Casablanca Supertuga Block 2023 and Ritual Syrah Valle de Casablanca Alcaparral Block 2022 defied expectations.

The Supertuga block, a roughly four-hectare, south-facing parcel planted around 2004, delivers a wine that exhibits formidable intensity and mouthwatering acidity, with rich, saline notes and savoriness. The syrah, from the north-facing Alcaparral block on the higher elevation within Ritual's holdings, draws our attention for its depth and complexity, presenting a spicy, meaty yet floral profile complemented by ripe yet fresh dark fruit – an authentic representation of syrah from the granite-based soils in Casablanca.

In Central Valley, Neyen's typical and complex old-vine cabernet and carmenere blend, the Neyen Valle de Colchagua Espíritu de Apalta 2022, exemplifies how carmenere and other Mediterranean varieties can thrive in sunny climes. And the Neyen Malbec Valle de Colchagua Espíritu de Apalta Limited Edition 2022, crafted mostly from century-old vines, offers a vibrant, acid-driven expression that highlights the charm of old vines while steering clear of any heaviness of malbec – and you heard it right, it is an eye-opening malbec from Chile, not Argentina.

Chile's remarkably fresh wines are increasingly emanating from Maule, extending to Itata and Bio-Bio – areas celebrated for their old-vine carignans, reductive and super-drinkable cinsaults and gnarled, ancient vines of país that produce lighter but more austere wines with Barolo-like tannins that, at their best, wow us.

Carter Mollenhauer is an artisanal project whose carignans dazzled, alongside their intriguing pais and cinsaults. Each wine in their range deserves a spot on your list if you appreciate wines that are somewhat austere yet pristine and honest, showcasing good acidity, purity and firmness. Zekun's favorites include the Carter Mollenhauer Maule Truquilemu Viñedo Truquilemu 2022, the Lonquén Arriba 2022, as well as the Pais Valle de Itata Aurora de Itata 2024 – an exceptional value for the pais lovers.

**– Jim Gordon, Aldo Fiordelli, Stuart Pigott and Zekun Shuai contributed reporting.**

**The list of wines below is comprised of bottles tasted and rated during the past week by James Suckling and the other tasters at [JamesSuckling.com](https://www.jamesSuckling.com). They include many latest releases not yet available on the market, but which will be available soon. Some will be included in upcoming tasting reports.**

**Note: You can sort the wines below by country, vintage, score and alphabetically by winery name. You can also search for specific wines in the search bar.**

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SCORE (HIGHEST TO LOWEST) ▾

PARADUXX NAPA VALLEY WINEMAKER SERIES CO-FERMENT 2022

⬆

Score **93**

Color     Red  
Country   United States  
Region    California  
Vintage   2022

This Rhone-style blend captures bold, rich and ripe fruit flavors as well as a subtly tannic texture for a feeling of silkiness despite a full body. Blackberries, dried blueberries, baked cherries and rose petals are complex and deep. Drink or hold.

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PARADUXX NAPA VALLEY PROPRIETARY RED WINE 2022

⬆

**Score** 92

**Color** Red

**Country** United States

**Region** California

**Vintage** 2022

A good, full-bodied wine that's polished in texture and nicely rich in black fruit flavors. Moderate tannins wrap around delicious blackberries, blueberries and dark chocolate. Well-concentrated and mouth-filling. Drink now or hold.

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PARADUXX NAPA VALLEY RECTOR CREEK VINEYARD - BLOCK 4 2022



**Score** 92

**Color** Red

**Country** United States

**Region** California

**Vintage** 2022

Rich and expressive, showing layers of blackcurrants, chocolate, mocha and a hint of bark. Full-bodied, dense and concentrated with well-integrated tannins and a compact core of ripe fruit in the middle. The finish is lingering and lightly chewy. Try in 2027.

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PARADUXX NAPA VALLEY RECTOR CREEK VINEYARD - BLOCK 5 2022



**Score** 92

**Color** Red

**Country** United States

**Region** California

**Vintage** 2022

Lush dark fruit with hints of chocolate, blue flowers and dried herbs on the nose. Full and polished, with succulent fruit and an almost silky texture, leading to a smooth finish, tightening up with hints of spice and cedar at the end. Drink or hold.

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PARADUXX NAPA VALLEY RECTOR CREEK VINEYARD RED WINE 2022



**Score** 91

**Color** Red

**Country** United States

**Region** California

**Vintage** 2022

This blend of cabernet sauvignon and zinfandel tastes fresh and ripe with generous blackberries, red cherries and light oak accents on a full body. It is juicy, not too tannic and appealing in a vibrant, direct way. Drink now.

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1 - 5 of 5 Tasting note



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