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[On Wine: Lettie Teague](#)

Napa Valley's Latest Contribution: 'Serious' Sauvignon Blanc

Though Napa is known mostly for its Cabernet Sauvignon, and for rather run-of-the-mill Sauvignon Blanc, a wave of ambitious Napa Sauvignons is garnering praise in high places



By
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I'VE BEEN TRAVELING to Napa Valley, Calif., for more than 20 years, but on my most recent trip I did something I'd never done: I tasted only Sauvignon Blanc. "I don't think I've ever heard of anyone doing that before," said Sam Kaplan, winemaker at Arkenstone Vineyards, one of the Sauvignon producers on my list.



Matthew Hollister

That's because, of course, Napa is famous for its [Cabernets](#). And yet the time seemed propitious for this particular pilgrimage. I'd tasted some very good Napa Sauvignons and heard about several others. I wanted to know when and how some key California winemakers became interested in producing "serious Sauvignon."

Sauvignon Blanc has long been planted all over the world—including Napa—and yet it struggles in comparison to, say, Riesling and Chardonnay. This is especially true in Napa, where the grape is short on acreage as well as prestige. As of 2013, 2,800-plus acres were planted with Sauvignon Blanc, compared with 20,000-plus acres of Cabernet Sauvignon. But while Cabernet is the prized variety, Sauvignon Blanc is valued as a cash crop. A great Cabernet can take years to mature while an average Sauvignon Blanc can be made in less than six months, without the expense of storage and aging. It's a wine that helps winemakers pay their bills, not win awards—at least until now.

More and more top Napa winemakers have been sourcing (or planting) the best vineyard sites for Sauvignon Blanc, experimenting with fermentation techniques and sampling clone types. The result is a group of much more ambitious—and ambitiously priced—wines, with some bottles fetching well over \$100.

The Arkenstone Vineyards Sauvignon Blanc (\$60) is one such wine. Only seven vintages have been produced and a couple hundred cases released each year, but the Sauvignon is “highly allocated,” according to Arkenstone proprietor Susan Krausz, who shook her head in disbelief as she noted this fact. The wine, as with most allocated wines, is available only in a tiny number of restaurants and stores, to mailing-list customers, and at the winery's tasting room.

The Arkenstone Sauvignon Blanc is produced solely from grapes grown on the winery's Howell Mountain estate, alongside their Cabernet. The former is far from a “run-of-the-mill cash crop,” said Mr. Kaplan when we sat down for a tasting. (That particular phrase was invoked quite often by serious-Sauvignon winemakers, clearly sensitive to the grape's reputation as a ready-money source.)

Mr. Kaplan explained why the Arkenstone Sauvignon was notable, starting with its origins in the special “317 clone,” which is thought to produce a more-nuanced wine, with less aggressive aromas. Most of all, however, the Arkenstone vineyard has the right volcanic soil, which was “crying out for Sauvignon Blanc and Sémillon,” according to Mr. Kaplan. (Sémillon is often blended with Sauvignon Blanc.) This was a first of a different sort: the only anthropomorphic characterization of a soil I'd ever heard.

The wines were most certainly alive in the glass. We tasted three vintages of Sauvignon: the current (2012) vintage as well the 2010 and the 2011 wines. The 2012, which is just becoming available, was a perfect synthesis of the soft, rounded 2010 wine and the more angular and minerally 2011.

Dan Petroski of Massican Winery, whom I met over lunch at the Solage Resort in Calistoga, also makes wines in tiny amounts (around 400 cases), including a Sauvignon Blanc he produced initially by accident. He'd intended to blend the grape, but it turned out so well he made it a single-varietal wine, now in its fourth vintage. The delightfully floral 2013 Marcassin Sauvignon Blanc was clear evidence he had made the right decision—a big, bright and lively wine that Mr. Petroski said had “California intensity but not California style.” In other words, it had plenty of power but wasn't short on finesse.

“ ‘There was a huge buzz over how arrogant we were,’ recalled Robin Lail of introducing her almost-\$100 Sauvignon. ”

Mr. Petroski has analyzed the state of Napa Valley Sauvignon and found that the wines don't have a clear identity, unlike the Sauvignon Blancs of New Zealand and France's Loire Valley. In Napa, “Sauvignon Blanc wants a goal,” he said, in an anthropomorphic twist of his own. “Let's give it a goal.”

Robin Lail of Lail Vineyards had a goal that some people considered overreaching when she introduced her almost-\$100 Georgia Sauvignon Blanc nearly 10 years ago. “There was a huge buzz over how arrogant we were,” recalled Ms. Lail with a satisfied smile.

I met Ms. Lail at the Auberge du Soleil resort, in Rutherford, for a tasting of her wines. She now makes two Sauvignon Blancs: Georgia and Blueprint. I recalled aloud that Ms. Lail had been one of the first serious Sauvignon Blanc producers in the Valley, and she quickly corrected me: “Not early—first!”

Ms. Lail brought along current and older vintages of both Sauvignon Blancs, the Blueprint (2007 and 2013) and Georgia (2003 and 2012). The former, at \$40 a bottle, is bright with marked acidity and a forward style, while the latter is a much bigger, richer wine—the winery’s statement Sauvignon Blanc, intended to replicate a great white Bordeaux (but without the addition of Sémillon) and priced similarly at around \$120 a bottle.

Although the wines have been well received and the Georgia has won high scores (critic Robert M. Parker, Jr. , has given it a 93-94 point score), her Sauvignons have yet to earn the scores of her Cabernets, which were always “96 plus points,” she said.

The “score ceiling” for Napa Sauvignon Blanc came up in conversation with Aron Weinkauff, winemaker at Spottswoode Estate Vineyard & Winery, one of my favorite longtime producers of quality Napa Sauvignon Blanc. (Another favorite is Crocker & Starr Winery, whose co-owner and winemaker Pam Starr has a real knack for Sauvignon. She was the winemaker at Spottswoode from 1991 to 1997.)

Mr. Weinkauff loves Sauvignon Blanc so much he can’t understand the perceived critical bias. “It’s not just an aromatic wine, it’s a textured wine,” he enthused. While Spottswoode Cabernets have earned very high scores (including a perfect 100-point score for their 2010 wine) the highest score Mr. Weinkauff could recall for a Spotts-woode Sauvignon was 92-93 points.

Mr. Weinkauff had a couple of older Sauvignon Blancs (2004 and 2009) to show me with the 2012 and 2013 wines. They were all bright and lively with wonderful citrus and floral aromas. The 2013 was particularly well-balanced, but the youthfulness of the 2004 really impressed me, with plenty of life and verve. Mr. Weinkauff said he preferred the less-ripe years for Sauvignon because of their higher acid profile—the opposite of Cabernet, which most people prefer in the ripe years.

The last Sauvignon Blanc I tasted was the 2013 Favia Sauvignon Blanc, made by the husband-and-wife team of Annie and Andy Erickson from their 1-acre vineyard in the Coombsville region of southeastern Napa. Like the Arkenstone Sauvignon, theirs is a rather pricey (\$85) and highly allocated wine—though I was able to purchase a bottle. The wine was decidedly full-bodied, dense but lithe with an impressive concentration and a firm mineral thread. Mr. Erickson too is a fan of Sauvignon Blanc, which he called a “beautiful variety.”

A highly regarded winemaking consultant, Mr. Erickson has won acclaim for his work with Cabernet (Screaming Eagle is his most famous client), but his reputation for Sauvignon seems to be growing. One new client is specifically interested in making Sauvignon Blanc. Is it possible for a winemaker to become a superstar in Napa based on Sauvignon Blanc? I asked. “I don’t know if you could,” Mr. Erickson replied carefully, “but it’s certainly an interesting thought.” Perhaps that—and a 100-point score—are the goals that Napa Sauvignon Blanc wants.

Oenofile: Five Fine Napa Valley Sauvignon Blancs



From left: 2013 Spottswode Napa and Sonoma County Sauvignon Blanc; 2012 Arkenstone Vineyards Howell Mountain Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc; 2013 Massican Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc; 2013 Lail Blueprint Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc; 2013 Hourglass Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc F. Martin Ramin/The Wall Street Journal (5)

2013 Spottswode Napa and Sonoma County Sauvignon Blanc, \$35

This Spottswode wine has been one of Napa’s best for almost three decades, and the 2013 is another success. The combination of Sonoma and Napa fruit—fermented in a combination of stainless steel, French oak and concrete eggs—is full-bodied but marked by a vibrant acidity and a beguiling nose of lime zest and honeydew.

2012 Arkenstone Vineyards Howell Mountain Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc, \$60

The Howell Mountain sub-region of Napa is known for reds, but Arkenstone winemaker Sam Kaplan said the soil of the estate’s vineyards is also perfect for Sauvignon Blanc. This one has a wonderful satiny texture—supple and lush, balanced by a bright acidity and penetrating mineral finish.

2013 Massican Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc, \$28

Although winemaker Dan Petroski said his first vintage of Sauvignon Blanc was an “accident,” it was clearly a happy one. Produced from an old vineyard in Napa’s Pope Valley, this is an intensely aromatic, full-bodied and well-structured wine that Mr. Petroski said is nearly the equal in quality to the first Sauvignon he produced, in 2009.

2013 Lail Blueprint Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc, \$40

When Robin Lail decided to pull up a Merlot vineyard in Napa to plant Sauvignon Blanc, people might have thought she was mad, but thanks to superstar winemaker Philippe Melka, the decision has proved anything but foolish. This is a very rich, very lush take on the grape, fermented entirely in new French oak.

2013 Hourglass Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc, \$40

Founder Jeff Smith said his first winemaker, Bob Foley, “hated” Sauvignon Blanc, but his current winemaker, Tony Biagi, is a fan. This is the first Sauvignon Blanc vintage from Hourglass and it’s a winner. Bursting with aromas of citrus, lime and even honeysuckle, it’s a round, lush wine with a long mineral finish.

<http://online.wsj.com/articles/napa-valleys-latest-contribution-serious-sauvignon-blanc-1412952800>