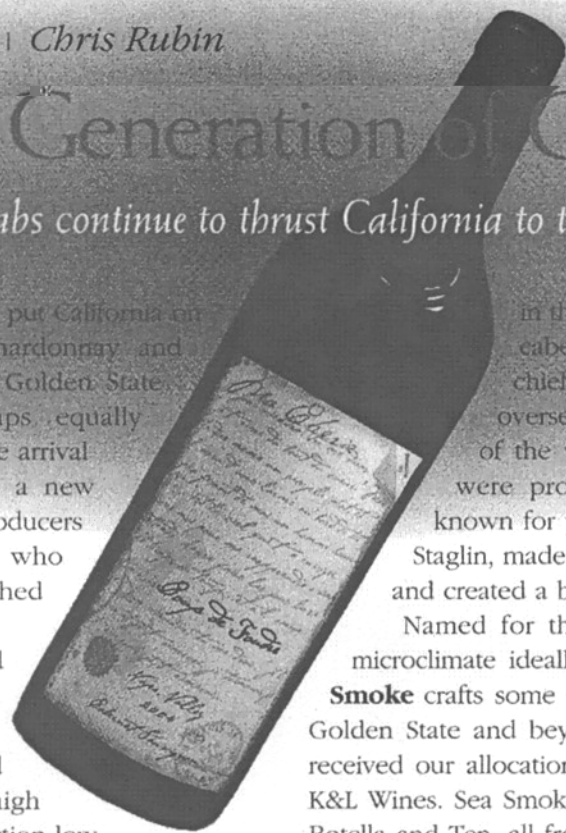


The Next Generation of Cult Wines

Magical Cabs continue to thrust California to the forefront.



The famous Paris Tasting in 1976 put California on the world's wine map as chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon from the Golden State, bested France's finest. But perhaps, equally important to Napa winemakers was the arrival of the "cult" wine phenomenon — a new generation of winemakers (mostly producers of cabernet from the Napa Valley) who unexpectedly surpassed the established names in the early '90s.

Christened by critics and championed by auctioneers and sommeliers, wineries like Harlan, Colgin, Grace, Screaming Eagle and Araujo burst on the scene with high scores, equally high prices and production low enough — typically just a few hundred cases — to make finding them nearly impossible: These are highly allocated wines you will not find at your corner store. Even the best wine shops will probably not have any of them on the shelves — Though some may hold a few bottles in the back for their preferred customers. Top restaurants may offer them on their "reserve" or "captain's" lists, but typically for many multiples of the original price, and sometimes with dubious provenance.

While it may be a bit late to try to get on the mailing lists of those well-established superstars, many wine fanatics rightly are busy looking for the next generation, and many contenders exist. When it comes to achieving cult wine status, there are a few magic words: Heidi Barrett, Helen Turley and — most magical of all — Robert Parker. The first two are winemakers while the latter undeniably ranks as the most influential wine critic in the world. Any Turley or Barrett wine gets extra attention, but the real star-maker is Parker. When he bestows a score in the mid to high 90s, the winery on the receiving end is certain to be deluged with calls, emails and faxes from people wanting to buy their best bottles.

Following are a few promising choices, most still selling for double digits when available direct from the winery.

Scarecrow comes up on virtually everybody's list of top new wineries, and its debut bottle, the 2003 Scarecrow Cabernet Sauvignon, pretty much hit one out of the park with near-perfect scores. The vineyard, in the Rutherford appellation of Napa Valley, was planted in 1945, and grapes

in the early years were used in Inglenook's cabernets. Property owner J.J. Cohen was chief of production at MGM, and his role in overseeing "The Wizard of Oz" is the source of the whimsical name. Less than 500 cases were produced. Winemaker Celia Masyczek, known for previously producing great cabernet at Staglin, made good use of those still active old vines and created a blockbuster of a wine.

Named for the coastal fog that creates a unique microclimate ideally suited to its pinot noir grapes, **Sea Smoke** crafts some of the most sought after pinots in the Golden State and beyond. "We almost had riots when we received our allocation," says Trey Beffa of Bay Area-based K&L Wines. Sea Smoke has three different bottles: Southing, ~~Roanoke and Ter~~, all from the Santa Rita Hills region of Santa Barbara County. These are pinots of unusual power and concentration.

Coup de Foudre translates as "when lightning strikes" or "thunderbolt," and that's what winemaking partners John Schwartz and Danielle Price (the latter a master sommelier, the former the director of wine for Wynn Las Vegas) have managed to capture in a bottle. The '04 cabernet sauvignon, the winery's debut, sold for \$100 on release, and only 500 cases were produced. A splash of syrah punches up the aromas with potent blueberry notes for unexpected liveliness.

Merlot has fallen out of favor with some, but enophiles know it's the grape that powers Chateau Pétrus, among the most sought after wines in the world. And it's merlot that's behind **Blackbird Vineyards**. The debut '04 and followup '05 releases, which sold for \$80 direct from the winery, are 95 percent merlot, 5 percent cabernet sauvignon, and both are powerhouses, showing the intense fruit of California's finest, with impressive balance and structure as well. Less than 1,500 cases were produced in each year.

The lone chardonnay that approached true cult status in the old days was Marcassin, made by Helen Turley. Today, it's unquestionably chardonnay from **Mark Aubert**, a consultant to many top wineries and now a winemaker in his own right, that holds top rank, and he offers four, all from Sonoma Coast fruit: Ritchie, Lauren, Reuling and Quarry. These wines, stratospherically priced for white wine, combine the best of California, manifested in their full flavor, with the balance and restraint of Burgundy.

Kutch, meanwhile offers a good chance to get in very early on an up-and-comer, at what will no doubt seem like a bargain price. This Russian River Valley pinot noir comes from two vineyards, Amber Ridge and Demeo. It goes through fermentation with native yeasts, ages on its lees for 16 months in 100 percent new French oak, and is bottled unfiltered and unfinned. All those steps educe intense fruit flavors, and the debut vintage — a grand total of just 150 cases — sells direct from the winery for under \$40. It's an impressive debut for winemaker Jamie Kutch, who ditched his job as a trader with Merrill Lynch in New York and headed west just a couple of years ago to learn the wine trade under the tutelage of Michael Browne of Kosta Browne Wines — a legendary pinot house with its own cult-like following.

Other contenders include **Gargiulo**, growing first-rate cabernet, merlot and more next door to the prime real estate of Screaming Eagle; **Levy & McClellan** from Harlan and Bond winemaker Bob Levy; and even one from superstar chef Thomas Keller (French Laundry, Per Se), who is said to be working on a project with Master Sommelier Paul Roberts.

If you want any of the original cult wines today, you're looking at buying at auction or in a top restaurant for a small fortune. With some of the above wines, you might still be able to get on their mailing lists, where you can buy them at their actual release prices.

STRATOS Details

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- **COUP DE FOUDRE**
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- **LEVY & MCCLELLAN**
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