Uncorked: Sullivan – Where the Old World Meets the New World With Elegance and Power

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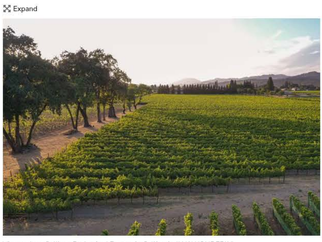

Vineyards at Sullivan Rutherford Estates in California (JAK WONDERLY)

By James Nokes

At Sullivan Rutherford Estate, Cœur de Vigne is not a single vineyard statement, rather it is a distillation of everything for which the estate stands.

According to winemaker Jeff Cole, the wine serves as a snapshot of the property in any given vintage. It serves to capture both the character of the vineyards and the cumulative decisions made from vine to cellar.

“The result is a single, cohesive age-worthy expression, defined by depth, structure and energy,” Cole said. “It’s our signature style that bridges old world restraint and new world power.”

Aromas of blueberry, plum, shaved dark chocolate, cedar and dried flowers offer a prelude to what awaits in the Sullivan Cœur de Vigne Cabernet Sauvignon 2022 ($100). Grounded by the mineral notes, well integrated tannins and a touch of dried herbs and loamy earth the plum, dark chocolate and elderberry.

The wine dances with the instant pleasure of the New World but harkens back to the Old World with a reserved approach that embraces acidity and the feral nature of dried herbs.

It’s a style that more winemakers in Napa Valley have recently embraced. It’s less flashy. There’s more substance than sizzle and it makes a wine that can be enjoyed immediately or be cellared for an extended period.

“To create a wine in our style, I look for dark, savory depth of flavor, layered structure and fine, persistent tannins, all balanced by fresh acidity,” Cole said. “These elements signal that the wine expresses our unique site with precision and energy, and is aligned with our intended style and long-term ageability.”

Because it’s not built around a single parcel, the strength of Cœur de Vigne lies in it being a mosaic, a composite, that offers a full expression with fruit sourced predominantly from the Sullivan Estate.

The estate’s oldest Cabernet Sauvignon block, naturally low-yielding, delivers structure and the classic ‘Rutherford dust’ a treasured trait for the region. Yet there are other blocks that Cole taps into to further define layers of flavors, energy and power.

“For the 2022 release, lots that showed dark, savory aromatics such as black cherry, graphite, earth and subtle herbal tones, along with firm tannin structure and fresh acidity, rose to the top,” Cole said. “These components allowed me to put together a site-driven blend built around depth, balance and complexity.”

TASTING NOTES

Brassfield Estate “Eruption” Lake County, California 2021 ($28): Inky and deep purple in the glass, this wine delivers intense layers of currant and black cherry, accented by dark chocolate and a subtle metallic edge. Prominent tannins frame the palate, building through a bold, enveloping finish.

Carmen Alto Jahuel, Chile, Cabernet Sauvignon 2021 ($100): Currant, clove and dark fruit aromas rise from the glass, setting the stage for flavors of ripe blackberry and plum layered with warm spice. Gravelly, structured tannins give the wine a firm backbone, while its full-bodied frame delivers depth and intensity. A character-driven Cabernet that balances richness with a distinctly earthy edge.

Charles Krug Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon 2023 ($42): Beautiful dark cherry flavors take center stage, accented by notes of cigar wrapper and freshly shaved nutmeg. Soft, polished tannins carry the wine through to a fresh, lively finish, where bright acidity reinforces cherry as the clear star of the show.

Le Vigne Paso Robles Cabernet Sauvignon 2021 ($28): An instant crowd pleaser, with concentrated dark fruit that leads the way; blackberry and ripe plum layered alongside notes of seared meat, floral lift and a touch of garrigue. The palate is plush and generous, finishing juicy and smooth.

Le Vigne “Di Domenico” Paso Robles Cabernet Sauvignon 2021 ($51): Currant and blackberry flavors are joined by hints of black licorice, framed by well-integrated tannins and a juicy, soft mouthfeel. This is a classy, well-balanced Cabernet with fresh acidity that promises an appealing evolution in the cellar for those willing to wait.

Lloyd Cellars “Prescription” Alexander Valley Cabernet Sauvignon 2021 ($30): A deep garnet in the glass, opens with black currant and ripe blackberry framed by a touch of cedar. The palate leans into dark plum and cassis. There’s subtle notes of dark chocolate, toasted oak and fresh ground coffee beans. Fuller bodied with well-integrated tannins and a pleasing spice-rack note on the finish.

Priest Ranch Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon 2022 ($60): Not that a reason is needed to visit Napa Valley, but the header on their web page tempts with a ‘Bacon & Wine Experience’ at its tasting room. Save a seat for me and enjoy this wine in the meantime.

Hints of wood smoke and fresh-cut flowers lift from the glass, joined by ripe blackberry on the nose. A bright burst of acidity carries flavors of blackberry, plum and fresh violet across the palate, while notes of smoky cedar and seared herbs linger on the finish.

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