

# The results

High alcohols and uneven quality in the generic-level wines marred what was otherwise a fine tasting, with our experts recommending most wines for good medium-term drinking. Tina Gellie reports

A SOLID AND enjoyable tasting, according to our experts, showing off what California's premium Cabernet regions do best – but also highlighting their low points.

‘Wines in the modern idiom,’ remarked David Motion. ‘Very juicy, concentrated and clean. There was a lot of oak – sometimes unwelcome – and a lot of alcohol.’ Given the growing conditions, Stephen Brook was happy not to find dilution or rot, but while he was encouraged by some very good wines, ‘it was inconsistent; there were poor ones too’.

The main complaint was high alcohol. For Brook it was ‘a real defect’ in otherwise good wines. ‘There’s no reason, even in Napa and even with global warming, to have 15.5% or 15.8%. Some wines stated they had 14.2% or 14.3% [tasters are told the alcohol] but they weren’t in balance, because the Californians are allowed to lie about alcohols.’

There is a 1.5% legal tolerance in California, so 15% on the label can mean anything from 13.5% to 16.5%. Brook said: ‘In my view that’s unethical. It explains why some wines don’t look that alcoholic on paper but knock you over when you taste them. It’s a huge drawback, and it applied to some of the more expensive wines. In all other respects the wine was terrific; I just don’t want that alcohol

*‘The highlight was the centre of Napa: Oakville, Stags Leap & Howell Mountain’* **Yohann Jousselin MS**

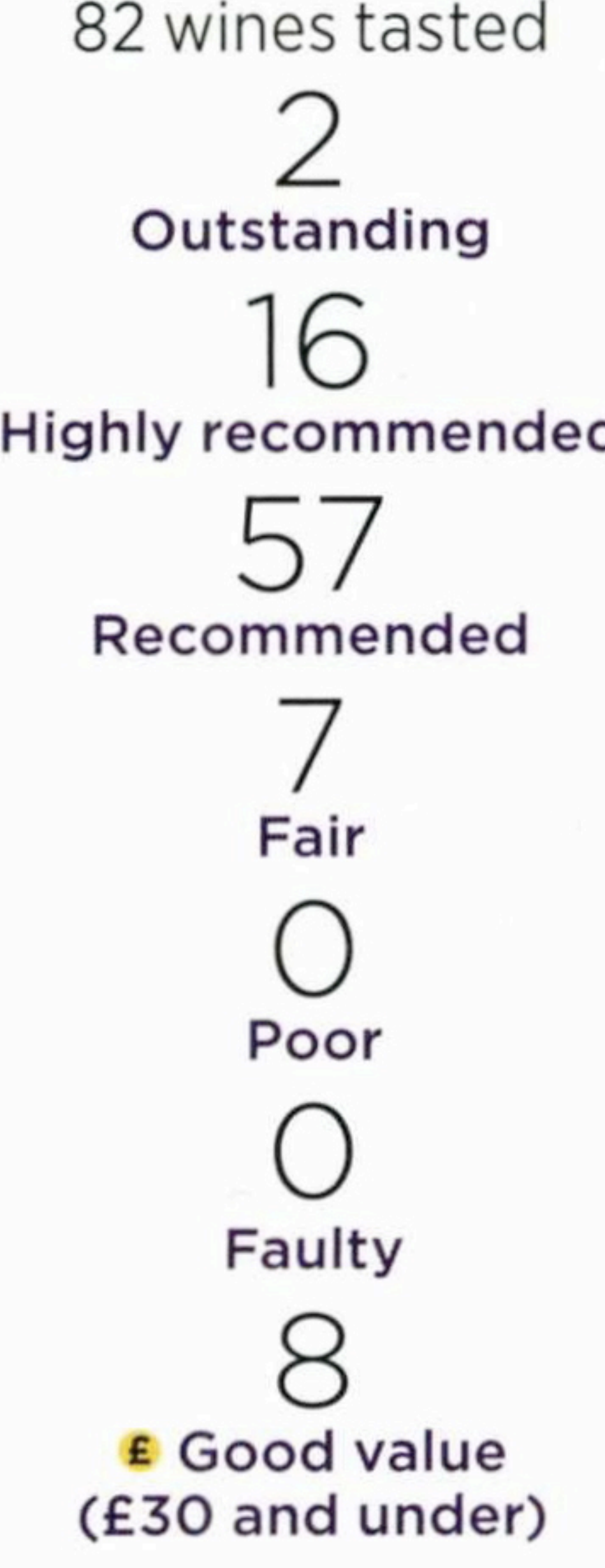
burn – it wrecks the wine. If I want Port I’ll go out and buy Port. It will cost me less and give me as much pleasure.’

In terms of the generic wines (blends from across the region), Brook noted angular acidity and a lack of fruit in Sonoma County but found many in Napa ‘a major disappointment... unbalanced, jammy, low in acidity and lacking freshness, which is essential when you’ve got that intensity of fruit’.

Motion pointed out that generic Napa included cheaper bottlings as well as more serious ones. Yohann Jousselin reckoned ‘you can find great generic Napa Cab at £10 to £12 a bottle’, but Motion and Brook weren’t so sure. ‘You could end up with something fairly horrific,’ said Brook.

When it came to specific AVAs, opinions were more positive. ‘Everything went up a gear,’ said Motion. ‘The

## The scores



# The tasters’ verdicts

## Stephen Brook



*Stephen Brook has been a contributing editor to Decanter since 1996. Brook has won a clutch of awards for his writing on wine, and is the author of more than 30 books, including Complete Bordeaux, now the definitive study of the region, and The Wines of California, which won three awards. Brook also fully revised the last two editions of Hugh Johnson’s Wine Companion, and he writes for magazines in many countries.*

### Brook’s verdict

‘With more than 600 wines bearing the Napa appellation, and a few hundred more with Sonoma on the label, it’s not easy to get an overview of the vintage even after 82 wines. For the most part they were balanced. ‘There were disappointments among the generic wines, for the obvious reason that they encompass both very serious wines from important producers and commercial bottlings from larger companies. Most of the best were in the individual AVAs, with Alexander Valley, as so often, showing well in Sonoma, and all in Napa displaying individuality and quality. ‘Excellent though many of the Sonoma wines were, it was Napa that demonstrated the grandeur and splendour of Cabernet Sauvignon. There were magnificent wines, and my average scores were high: this is a vintage that can be bought with confidence. Sub-regional typicity is hard to pin down, with only Stags Leap standing apart with discernibly elegant, balanced wines. Some acidities seemed low, and this may not be a vintage for the long haul. And the curse of deliberately overripe, wildly alcoholic wines continues to dog Napa Cabernets.’

## Yohann Jousselin MS



*Yohann Jousselin MS was until recently head sommelier at The Vineyard at Stockcross, Decanter’s 2012 Restaurant of the Year (see p84). Responsible there for a cellar comprising over 30,000 bottles, many Californian, he was voted Chaine des Rotisseurs’ Young International Sommelier of the Year in 2009 and Piper Heidsieck’s UK Sommelier of the Year in 2011.*

### Jousselin’s verdict

‘A great tasting; I really enjoyed the diversity of the vintage. I first tasted 2009 last year in Napa, and at the time I was already very impressed by the balance of most of the wines. Today’s tasting was very difficult as there were many wines with a high concentration of ripeness. I like 2009 as an overall vintage but I do think that the best wines are those with higher acidity. ‘Unfortunately, the wines from Sonoma were not showing as well as expected. Most of them were very closed and had alcohol levels that were slightly too high. I think those will need a bit more time before they are ready to show well. The generic Napa wines were very consistent in quality and showed a great potential for ageing. But the highlights of the day for me were the wines from the northern part of the Napa Valley, especially Diamond Mountain and Howell Mountain. Those wines showed greater complexity and elegance. ‘This tasting has confirmed my opinion of the vintage. Cabernet Sauvignon from Napa in 2009 has a high potential for ageing; the wines are rich and opulent. I think the best results are to be found in Diamond Mountain, Howell Mountain, Rutherford and Stags Leap.’



# Napa & Sonoma Cabernet 2009

wines were much silkier; the quality of the fruit was great, and even when there was a ton of oak you could see that everything was beautifully done.' Jousselein agreed: 'Alexander Valley definitely showed much better than other parts of Sonoma. But the highlight for me was the centre of Napa: Oakville, Stags Leap and Howell Mountain. The best had great acidity and round tannins. Because of the sweetness on most, if the acidity was there it gave back-up.' Brook favoured Diamond Mountain, as well as Stags Leap for its 'usual elegance and balance'.

In terms of identifiable regionality, Jousselein said Stags Leap was the only AVA that stood out, thanks to its 'acidity, freshness and minty character'. Motion and Brook agreed, the latter adding: 'It's very difficult to talk about sub-regionality in Napa. People do it glibly all the time, but I think that if you asked them to pick out blind which is which, most would stumble.'

As for longevity, 'it's hard to know what they will do,' said Motion, 'but from experience the best Californian wines last for decades.' Jousselein felt that the more restrained wines would age best: 'Most were very ripe and lacking acidity and I fear that in 10 years' time they will be tired.' Brook recalled the opulent 1997 vintage, which has held up less well than cooler 1991 and 1994. 'Time will tell, but 2009 is an excellent year. The quality at the top is very, very good.'

**Entry criteria:**  
Producers and UK agents were invited to submit any 2009 generic and specific AVA wines from Napa Valley and Sonoma County

## Outstanding 18.5–20pts (95–100pts)



### Dunn Vineyards, Howell Mountain, Napa Valley

Decanter average score: 18.5/20pts (95/100pts)

Individual judge's scores:

Stephen Brook 18.5 Yohann Jousselein MS 18.5 David Motion 18.5

£74.99 The Winery

With a craggy face, handsome mustache and cowboy hat, Randy Dunn is Napa Valley's original mountain man. He embraces Howell Mountain's volcanic soils, 600m elevations and the thick-skinned, tannic grapes grown there. Always 100% Cabernet Sauvignon, they show the herbal side of the variety, and are 14% alcohol or less, even if Dunn must use reserve osmosis technology to reduce the potency.

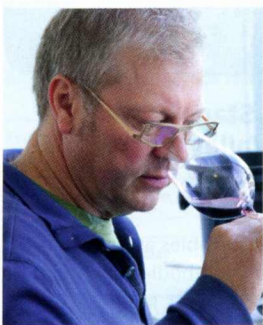
**Stephen Brook** Rich, comforting black fruits nose, with an elegant toastiness. Medium-bodied, ripe and almost sweet without being jammy, concentrated and sleek, and with a touch of alcohol just about carried by the fruit. Very good length, harmonious and complete.

**Yohann Jousselein MS** A supremely elegant wine. This shows a lot of ripe red fruits that are balanced by lovely acidity. It's a lighter style of Napa Cabernet Sauvignon, yet still contains great complexity.

**David Motion** Blackcurrant leaf and savoury notes on the nose. Palate is cool and polished, comprising flavours of blueberry, blackcurrant and sea salt.

**Drink** 2013–2030 **Alcohol** 13.9%

## David Motion



David Motion is owner of London merchant The Winery, which is known particularly for its selection of Italian, Spanish, German and Californian wines.

### Motion's verdict

'2009 seems to be a homogeneous, easy-to-like vintage in both Sonoma and Napa. Across the board the wines were well made, mainly in the modern idiom. Stand-outs for me were those that evoked classic Napa and Sonoma

Cabernets from the 1970s and 1980s – wines that are enjoyable to this day. At generic level, the wines were solid, if occasionally lacking some excitement. Many of the basic Napa Valley appellation wines were highly alcoholic and those with stated alcohol levels over 14.5% frequently tasted more like Zinfandel than classy Cabernet Sauvignon.

'The sub-regions were a big step up in quality, more focused and expressive, with clear terroir specificity. Alexander Valley is worth drawing attention to on the Sonoma side. The high-altitude AVAs, such as Spring Mountain, Howell Mountain and Diamond Mountain, really showed their breeding, as did Stags Leap District and Oakville on the Napa Valley floor.

'It was a pleasure to see such a spread of names from different eras making delicious wines: long established names such as Mondavi, Philip Togni and Trefethen, through to some that seemed to rise in the 1990s such as Staglin and Whitehall Lane and, more recently, Cliff Lede. I was also excited to see some unfamiliar names. I will be hopping on a plane shortly!'



### Oakville Ranch, Oakville, Napa Valley 18.5 (95)

SB 18.5 YJ 18.5 DM 18.5

N/A UK [www.oakvillerranch.com](http://www.oakvillerranch.com)

Women rule at Oakville Ranch. Londoner Mary MacInnes Miner and her American husband Bob Miner purchased Oakville Ranch in 1989, but Bob's death in 1994 left Mary in charge. She now relies on general manager Paula Kornell (daughter of pioneering Napa Valley sparkling wine producer Hans Kornell) and winemaker Anne Vawter to enhance the brand. The 'token' male is vineyard manager Phil Coturri, a buddy of Grateful Dead band members and proponent of organic practices. Oakville Ranch is a sleeper among superstars – its wines become more complex with every vintage.

**SB** Super-ripe blackcurrant nose, with minty notes. Rich but firm, with some welcome austerity. The palate is less flamboyant than the nose, with robust tannins. Has ample acidity and persistence, but the fruit quality is excellent, as is the balance.

**YJ** A ripe style of Cabernet Sauvignon from Napa, it offers a lot of baked, dark fruit aromas given plenty of freshness due to the acidity and vegetal character of the wine. Great balance.

**DM** A lovely, deep wine with intense levels of concentrated, brambly fruit. A dense, generous offering with plenty of structure and a very long finish.

**Drink** 2013–2030 **Alc** 14.5%



## My top three

Stephen Brook

### ■ Spottswoode, St Helena, Napa Valley

This long-established vineyard always produces exceptional and elegant wines, and this is no exception. It's the purity and poise that make this so distinguished.

A bling-free wine that will give pleasure when young or after 10 years in bottle.

**18.5/20pts (95/100pts) Drink 2014–2030**

### ■ Diamond Creek, Gravelly Meadow, Diamond Mountain District, Napa Valley

This property makes three Cabernets from different terroirs, and for decades they've been classic wines. In the past they could be too tannic, but today show power and intensity without excessive extraction.

Built to last. **18.5 (95) Drink 2015–2025**

### ■ Far Niente, Oakville, Napa Valley

A historic Oakville property with a long track record, but marginalised by new arrivals in Napa. But the Cabernet has always been great and 2009 is no exception: voluptuous and velvety, fine tannins, and a long harmonious finish. Simply delicious.

**18.5 (95) Drink 2013–2030**

## My top three

Yohann Jousselin MS

### ■ Staglin Family Vineyard Estate,

**Rutherford, Napa Valley** A lovely subtle Cabernet with firm tannins, a generous ripeness and great acidity. The wine offers a very intense nose with notes of ripe black fruits followed by a touch of cedar wood, tobacco and a hint of eucalyptus which bring a touch of freshness. **18.5/20pts (95/100pts) Drink 2014–2030**

### ■ Diamond Creek, Gravelly Meadow, Diamond Mountain District, Napa Valley

I've always enjoyed the complexity of these wines. Another great example of a lighter, fresher style of Cabernet from Napa. It's elegant and pure with notes of crème de cassis, coffee, tobacco and a very long finish. **17.5 (91) Drink 2015–2025**

### ■ O'Shaughnessy, Howell Mountain,

**Napa Valley** A lovely wine, very different from my other two picks. It's intense with notes of ripe dark fruit as well as chocolate, toffee and sweet spices balanced by a very sharp acidity. It will be outstanding in 10 years' time. **18.5 (95) Drink 2013–2030**

## My top three

David Motion

### ■ Robert Mondavi, Reserve, Oakville,

**Napa Valley** I'm delighted to find the new owners are not tinkering with this iconic label. This wine ages beautifully and while it sits comfortably with European palates, it's unmistakably Napa. The '09 has intense summer and autumn fruit, with a silky mouthfeel. Concentrated, supple and long. **19/20pts (96/100pts) Drink 2013–2035**

### ■ J Davies, Diamond Mountain District, Napa Valley

Fragrant with roses and Turkish Delight, it has tightly wound, deep fruit and a lovely freshness. Made by Schramsberg, the sparkling wine producer, from three parcels on Diamond Mountain, including Jacob Schram's two original hillside vineyards from 1862.

**17.5 (91) Drink 2013–2025**

### ■ Lancaster Estate, Alexander Valley,

**Sonoma County** This reminds me of what drew me to Cal Cabs and Alexander Valley in particular, in the 1980s and '90s. It has an enjoyably retro nose of cedar, mint and eucalyptus. There's a good fruit and structure but I found it nicely traditional and not over-juicy. I adore this herbal, more restrained style. **17 (90) Drink 2013–2030**

NB: the tasters' top wines are not necessarily their top-scoring, rather those which, on learning the wines' identity, they feel are the most notable given their provenance, price or other factors

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# Decanter

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### New World wines you'll want to try

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#### Crus bourgeois 2010

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#### White Burgundy 2011

'Elegance and purity over power and concentration'

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#### Californian Cabernets

Rating the 2009 vintage from Napa and Sonoma

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