

# California dreaming

The wines of Napa Valley and Sonoma County are back in the frame, their characteristic exuberance tempered with the restraint that first wowed the world in 1976. Our columnist, Zeren Wilson, reports

Photography by Chris Brooks

I left my heart in San Francisco. More specifically, in Santa Rosa among the vineyards of Sonoma County's Russian River Valley. The wines played a big part, but yes, it did involve a girl. It always does.

Wines from The Golden State are in the throes of a glorious renaissance, reclaiming a reputation that was first famously trumpeted to the world in the wake of the Judgement of Paris in 1976 – when California trumped France in a host of blind tastings (judged by French tasters) and the world of wine shifted on its axis. In an era when the finest wines on the planet were accepted to be those produced in Europe, one witness proclaimed the results to be a 'shot heard round the world'. California was swaggering.

In the intervening years, a rash of blowzy broad-shouldered wines crept onto the scene, over-extracted and over-ripe, sweetened with the seasoning of too much new American oak, and possessing little of the grace and elegance that had cowed the French at that famous tasting.

For me, the thrills of the California wine region are manifold, bound to the place itself (the sweeping landscape, the energy of the restaurants, the wine-country lifestyle) as well as qualities of the wines: the soaring aromatics of a Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir; the flush of ripeness from an Alexander Valley Chardonnay; the plush, sleek fruit of a Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon. There is an exuberance to these wines which is immediately engaging, and when the best possess a freshness and grace as well, it makes me a bit giddy.

There are plenty of examples of 'old school' wineries that have never really veered away from a restrained style: Chateau Montelena (one of the stalwart 1976 victors) and Dunn in Napa Valley, for instance, or Joseph Swan, Hafner and Schug in Sonoma. Now, however, some of the younger bucks are returning to a more sensitive and less heavy-handed approach, picking grapes earlier to retain acidity, using oak in a more considered way, and making wines that express a sense of place rather than homogenous characterless wines that contain great gobs of fruit and a thunderclap of alcohol.

A book published this year is a call to arms: in *The New California Wine*, Jon Bonné writes 'from the front lines of the California wine revolution', telling

the story of those who are 'rewriting the rules of contemporary winemaking'. There is a lot to get excited about: in the Grüner Veltliner and Riesling from Tatomer in Santa Barbara (taut, nervy and full of precision), the lushly textured Trousseau Gris crafted by Jolie-Laide in the Russian River Valley, and the Chardonnay and Pinot Noir sparkling with flashes of Burgundian style from Sandhi Wines. Or the sumptuous Syrah from Copain and Arnot-Roberts, and the fine-boned and ethereal Pinot Noir from Jamie Kutch (a winemaker I found sorting grapes at cult boutique winery Kosta Browne, when he was learning his craft in 2006).

Another winery that embodies Californian elegance is Littorai in Sonoma, where Ted Lemon crafts a Chardonnay and Pinot Noir of eye-watering beauty. Lemon is very much held up as a role model by the new breed of wine makers, and his steely determination to follow the edicts of biodynamic winemaking with minimal interference and additions chimes with a broader trend evident in many European wine regions. The wineries now leading the charge are clearly looking backwards for their stylistic mentors, shifting away from the era of fruit bombs aimed squarely at achieving big Robert Parker points, which has kept the American market in thrall for so long.

In the UK, fine Californian wines have historically come with another image problem – of perceived value. There has been a chasm between entry-level prices for brands such as Gallo, and the really decent stuff, with very little in between – overpriced and over here, so to speak. A wine bar in the UK majoring on wines from California would previously have seemed foolhardy, even impossible. Now, new London wine bar Mission, owned by trailblazers Sager and Wilde, has been brave enough to base its concept on this Californian resurgence, a strong indicator that something compelling enough is happening for the wines to make a real dent in the ferociously competitive UK wine market.

Californian wines have got their swagger back, and in a way that is beginning to filter into the mainstream – and as a long-time lover of the wines of the region, this makes me very happy indeed. *Zeren Wilson is the author of the influential wine blog [bittenandwritten.com](http://bittenandwritten.com)*



[ WINE ]

**Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir 2012,  
Littorai, Sonoma, California**

Ted Lemon worked as a winemaker in Burgundy. Some of the most elegant expressions of Pinot Noirs in California.  
[libertywines.co.uk](http://libertywines.co.uk)

**Kick-On Ranch Riesling 2011,  
Tatomer, Santa Barbara,  
California**

Graham Tatomer worked with Riesling in Austria. Lean and racy with great tension.  
[robersonwine.com](http://robersonwine.com)

**Chardonnay 2011, Hafner,  
Alexander Valley, California**

Brothers Scott and Parke Hafner grow only Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon. Wonderful balance and value.  
[thewineryuk.com](http://thewineryuk.com)

