

Sauvignon Blanc's Expanding Horizons

Emerging regions bring excitement to California's go-to value white

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California Sauvignon Blanc offers a large selection of delicious wines to choose from, with some of the state's most modestly priced and widely available whites. Having built a consistent track record with a core of solid producers and perennial values, the category is branching out in new directions, as a fresh crop of labels and emerging regions appear on the scene.

Take Happy Canyon of Santa Barbara, one of the newest and smallest American Viticultural Areas in California. Established only two years ago, it encompasses an area about one-tenth the size of Napa Valley. But it's already making an impact, with three outstanding releases in this year's report.

"Of all the areas growing Sauvignon Blanc in Santa Barbara, Happy Canyon seems to be producing the best results," explains vintner Doug Margerum, who points to its warm climate and unique soils.

Dragonette winemaker Brandon Sparks-Gillis cites the region's ancient geologic make-up: "It's a place of convergence and extremes where two mountain ranges come together and meet with ocean influence. It has that sort of Wild West feel to it, and even the soils tell that story."

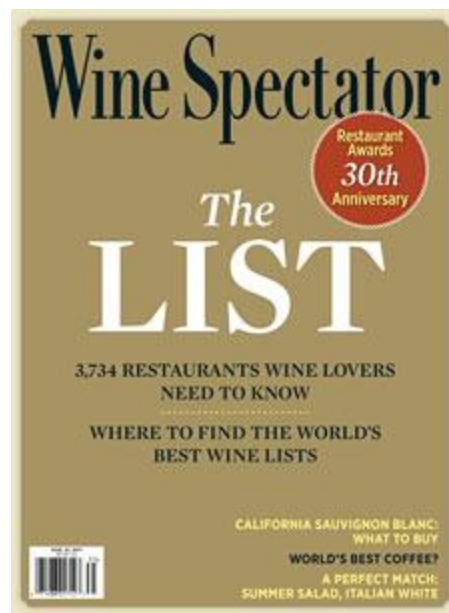
A few hundred miles north in Sonoma, Captûre has carved out a name for itself, delivering a string of outstanding wines since its debut with the 2008 vintage, including the current-release Sauvignon Blanc Sonoma County Les Pionniers 2010 (90 points, \$40). The label was founded by two families, Tara and Ben Sharp and Carol and Mike Foster, with winemaker Denis Malbec-formerly of Château Latour-at the helm.



"We are so committed to the elegance of Sauvignon Blanc," says Ben Sharp, whose labor-intensive sorting process leads to weekly lees stirring for five months. Sharp believes that wine drinkers can tell how seriously the winery takes the grape.

New wineries such as Captûre are just one of the reasons this is such a good time for California Sauvignon Blanc. Since my previous report ("Endless Summer," Aug. 31, 2010), I have blind-tasted more than 150 of these wines in our Napa office, and once again I was pleased by the overall quality. For the ninth straight year, the vast majority of the Sauvignon Blancs reviewed rated 85 or more points on the *Wine Spectator* 100-point scale, with more than 40 percent scoring 88 points or higher. (A [free alphabetical list](#) of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available.)

The top-scoring wines come from some names that will be familiar to Sauvignon Blanc lovers, like Merry Edwards, Peter Michael, Chalk Hill and Sbragia Family. In particular, the Peter Michael Sauvignon Blanc Knights Valley L'Après-Midi 2009 (93, \$48) and Merry Edwards Sauvignon Blanc Russian River Valley 2009 (93, \$30)



demonstrate the complexity of this grape in the right hands, showing rich textures and plenty of aromatics while remaining juicy and refreshing.

The new names on this year's list of top-scorers include a handful from Happy Canyon, as demonstrated by the region's three 90-plus bottlings: Margerum's Sybarite 2010 (91, \$21) and D 2010 (90, \$36) and Dragonette's Vogelzang Vineyard 2009 (90, \$48).

Another relatively new wine region is Yolo County, northeast of Napa, where a new label called Casey Flat Ranch has set up shop. Its Sauvignon Blanc Capay Valley 2009 (89, \$23) comes from part of a 6,000-acre ranch that is home to longhorn cattle; the vineyard is carved out of rocky soils and mountain slopes at an altitude of 2,000 feet.

Bump is a newcomer to keep your eye on as well; its Sauvignon Blanc Sonoma Coast Adobe Vineyard 2009 (92, \$18) is especially impressive at less than \$20. Winemaker Geordie Carr gets the grapes for this bottling from a vineyard exposed to the maritime influences of the Pacific, which helps maintain its juicy acidity and pure fruit flavors. The eponymous label from celebrity chef Tyler Florence also makes its mark in this report with its debut Sauvignon Blanc, the Napa Valley Blend #4 2009 (89, \$20), which shows fresh pineapple and lime zest flavors on a round frame.

To add to all this good news, Sauvignon Blanc continues to dominate in the value category. Half of the wines I reviewed this year cost \$20 or less, and many of the recommended wines are widely available. For terrific versions that are nationally distributed, check out the Beringer Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley 2009 (89, \$16), Firestone Sauvignon Blanc Santa Ynez Valley 2009 (88, \$13), Rodney Strong Sauvignon Blanc Northern Sonoma Charlotte's Home 2009 (87, \$14) or Bogle Sauvignon Blanc California 2010 (86, \$9), all of which have been consistent values for years.

California Sauvignon Blancs come in a variety of flavor profiles, but there is a common thread of acidity that runs through these crisp wines. Bright and juicy, they typically display fruit flavors of grapefruit, lemon, apple, melon, pear and apricot. Some versions veer toward tropical notes of pineapple or mango, while others exhibit herbal, grassy, floral or mineral notes. Certain vintners also expose the wines to oak, which can give them a spicy, toasty or even smoky character.

The majority of the wines reviewed this year were from the 2009 vintage, with a handful of late-release 2008 bottlings and some early-release 2010s, which are just starting to hit the shelves. Sauvignon Blanc is often picked early, avoiding the kind of late-season drama that can make vintages inconsistent for other varieties.

In 2009, that meant most Sauvignon Blanc grapes were already picked when harvesttime rains created issues of rot for fruit still on the vine. While 2008 and 2009 are both good vintages for Sauvignon Blanc, the '08s are perhaps a tad more concentrated and aromatic, while the '09s are more balanced and full of pure fruit flavors. The 2010s I've tasted so far have been extremely juicy, some showing a touch of coarseness on the finish.

One of Sauvignon Blanc's most appealing characteristics is its ability to pair with a variety of foods. Its natural acidity is like a squirt of lemon to brighten many dishes, going particularly well with oysters, fish, white meat and vegetables.

Classically paired with goat cheese, it also matches with spicy and tangy foods and a number of Asian cuisines, including sushi.

Sauvignon Blancs are bottled and released quickly, and are best drunk young, when their acidity is still bright and fresh. Some of the outstanding examples have a few more years of life in them, but most of the wines here should be enjoyed within the next year or two. About a third of the bottlings reviewed are topped with a screw cap, further emphasizing that these wines drink well upon release.

Whether you've got a favorite stalwart or are interested in exploring some of the new names and regions, the quality, value and refreshing character of California Sauvignon Blanc is as strong as it's ever been. The varietal's drink-me-now style is just another reason not to hesitate—so grab a glass and enjoy.