

Pine Ridge cabernet leaves others in the dust

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Rutherford vintners are all smiles about wines from the 2003 Napa Valley grape harvest.

And well they should be, for a recent tasting of some two dozen cabernets from the land of "Rutherford dust" revealed lush wines packed with layers of juicy black and red fruit.

Held in what once was Inglenook's historic chateau -- now Francis Ford Coppola's Rubicon Estate -- the tasting for media and trade was hosted by the Rutherford Dust Society, a trade group of vintners and growers in the Rutherford appellation committed to producing and promoting quality wines from the heart of the valley.

Nearly giddy about the prospect of releasing such excellent wines, Rutherford winemakers were eager to share facts that contributed to the rosy outlook for '03 wines, slated for release in a few months.

They talked about a relatively warm winter in 2002/2003 (some vines refused to go dormant), and how seven inches of spring rain slowed down flowering.

It was an average season, more or less, said Rubicon General Manager Larry Stone, until some heat spikes in September slowed ripening down.

"Then we experienced one of the most beautiful Octobers ever," added vintner Davie Pia. "It was 95 degrees on Halloween eve. If growers hadn't rushed to pick in September, they saw vines rehydrate and grapes hang (and ripen) for another month."

"It was a perfect month for cabernet sauvignon," agreed Joel Aiken, director of winemaking at Beaulieu Vineyard. "Wineries could bring grapes in when they were ready to be picked."

Asked to compare vintages 2002 and 2003, Stone labeled '02 "a very ripe vintage" and '03 one in which consumers "will be able to evaluate the style of winemaking (at wineries where there was) no rush to harvest."

Napa Valley had a big cabernet sauvignon crop in 2003, a total of 49,000 tons, which amounted to a 21 percent increase in tonnage over the previous crush. Prices per ton for cabernet remained relatively stable in 2003 -- the average price paid was \$4,012 -- which might account for some pretty good bottle prices for vintage 2003.

For example, the wine I and a number of wine writers singled out for top-of-the-list honors at the Rutherford Dust Society tasting. Not only is it a bargain (for a Napa Valley cabernet), but it is also a lip-smacking glass of wine, the 2003 Pine Ridge Rutherford cabernet sauvignon (\$40) demands a second and, quite possibly, a third pour. My initial note on an evaluation sheet reads "fabulous." Winemaker Stacy Clark has provided consumers with a complex expression of the vintage -- layers and layers of ripe cherries and blackberries are quite evident in both aroma and taste. There's a bit of toasty vanilla, along with a hint of tobacco, in the nose, while a dash of mocha latte and a whisper of

minerality linger in the wine's super-long cherry pie finish. And you'd never know that this is a wine with 14.4 percent alcohol.

Members of the sponsoring organization trade on the so-called "Rutherford dust" characteristic of their wines. Ask these vintners to tell you what Rutherford dust actually is and you'll get a number of answers. It was a term coined by the late Andre Tchelistcheff, dean of California winemakers, who helmed the BV winemaking effort for nearly four decades. Personally, I think it's the dry tannins one can detect in tasting the wines. I didn't detect any "dust" in this Pine Ridge offering.

What Clark and her winemaking team have provided is an excellent expression of not only the pleasures of this grape variety but also a wine that we can enjoy at this early stage in its development. That doesn't mean the wine won't age. But I don't know if we'll ever find out, as we'll be too tempted to drink it before the year's out. Let's see, production was 10,300 cases -- at one bottle a day...

From the same stock

Two of the fall release wines come from fruit grown by Hugh Tietjen on a seven-acre plot at the base of the Mayacamas that he planted in the '80s entirely to cabernet sauvignon. It was revealing to see how the same basic fruit fared in wines from a pair of respected vintners.

The 2003 Elyse Tietjen Vineyard cabernet sauvignon (\$65) from Ray Coursen offers an inviting aroma of blackberries with a spritz of coconut, followed by an mouthful of black fruit -- a concentrated wine with well-integrated tannins. The long finish hints at freshly foraged mushrooms underlying the lush fruit. Production is 675 cases.

One gets a slightly different take on the 2003 Monticello Vineyards Tietjen Vineyard cabernet sauvignon (\$45) from brothers Chris and Kevin Corley. Here there's more cherry than blackberry characteristic in both aroma and taste. The silky tannins in both of the Tietjen offerings are prominent here but neither give off any "dust." The Monticello Tietjen also delights with a big, lingering cherry finish.

I think it would be fun to pick up a bottle of each and do your own comparison. I think you'll enjoy both wines. And should you want more of, say, the Monticello, you'll be saving 20 bucks. But there's a lot fewer cases of this one -- only 145.

Here are some more of the 2003 cabs from Rutherford I enjoyed that you'll be able to find real soon on retail shelves:

Provenance Vineyards 2003 Rutherford cabernet sauvignon (\$40): winemakers Tom Rinaldi and Chris Cooney have provided wine lovers with a choice wine at a very attractive price. It bursts on nose and palate with bright red cherries, then offers a dash of mocha on a pleasing dusty finish. Yes, here's the dust the Rutherford clan talks about.

Martin Estate 2003 Collector's Reserve cabernet sauvignon (\$100): a lovely olfactory experience, this offering from winemaker Jeff Stebben allows for expressions of all manner of exceptional fruit -- cherries, blackberries, even blueberries. There's a hint of mint on the fruity nose and a lush, long finish. Only 300 cases were produced of this winning wine, with release scheduled after the snow flies.

Frog's Leap 2003 Rutherford cabernet sauvignon (\$65): the initial sip prompted me to think: "What a lovely wine." A wonderful berry nose give ways to a lush, velvety blend of cassis and cherries on the palate, with a hint of Halloween spice on the finish.

Tres Sabores 2003 Rutherford Perspective cabernet sauvignon (\$50): a promising nose on a big, fruit-forward cab -- black plums and cherries -- with attractive cassis and a bit of herbes de Provence.

Rubicon 2003 Cask cabernet sauvignon (\$65): cherries and butter brickle on the nose, while juicy ripe,

luscious plums and black cherries fill the mouth - and linger -- and linger.

Sequoia Grove 2003 Morisoli Vineyard cabernet sauvignon (\$85): there's familiar black cherry and vanilla aromas from this enjoyable cab that also expresses Rutherford dust. Black cherries, peppers and chocolate combine on the palate.

Beaulieu Vineyard 2003 Georges de Latour Private Reserve cabernet sauvignon (\$95): full-bodied, ruby offering from the BV winemaking team. Blackberries and a touch of anise on the nose, while black cherries, blackberries and a dash of pepper link up on the palate.

Quintessa 2003 (\$120): a seductive nose on Aaron Pott's blend of cabernet sauvignon and merlot combines cassis and mineral notes. In the mouth, the wine is generous with soft, silky tannins and layers of ripe black fruit.

Staglin Family Vineyard 2003 Rutherford cabernet sauvignon (\$150): the intense, lovely nose here rewards us with cassis, black plums and black cherries, all of which are evident on the palate. There's a finish of ripe Bing cherries with a hint of black olives. If your cab budget allows, this may be one to buy and lay down.

In fact, a number of the wines tasted are excellent candidates for cellaring. Where the '02 harvest produced a number of wines to be enjoyed now, the '03 may well have given us wines for the future.