

Chateau Montelena: The Longevity, And Continuing Importance, Of An American Wine Icon

There are a handful of Napa Valley producers that have achieved legendary status—names that aren't just indicative of the highest levels of grape growing and winemaking, but that have become, in many ways, synonymous with American wine in general. One of these iconic estates, [Chateau Montelena](#), is celebrating the 50th anniversary of Jim Barrett's purchase of the property in 1972 with a number of events throughout the year, including a special gathering at the chateau itself on May 7th.

While I won't be able to make it, I did have the chance to sit down (via Zoom) and speak with CEO and winemaker Bo Barrett and winemaker Matt Crafton to discuss what makes Chateau Montelena not just so important historically, but also so indispensable even today. We also tasted half a dozen wines that demonstrated the fantastic age-worthiness of their Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon in distractingly delicious, utterly fascinating ways.



After two hours of conversation, my main take-away is that Chateau Montelena's continued success is in large part thanks to their laser focus not just on quality, but on their willingness to allow each vintage to shine in its own unique way. In other words, there is no paint-by-numbers approach to making their Chardonnays and Cabernets (they also produce excellent Zinfandel, Sauvignon Blanc, and Riesling, but the Chardonnay and Estate Cab are their flagships), no insistence that each year taste like a relative of the previous one. Instead, like so many of the greatest producers throughout Napa Valley and around the world, Barrett and Crafton take what each year gives them and make the most of it, while still allowing those specific conditions to leave their indelible fingerprint on the final wine in the bottle.

To accomplish this, they've famously picked their grapes when they have felt they're ripe, and not a day later than that if possible. "As soon as the grapes are perfectly ripe, and the tannins are right, we pick them," Barrett told me. "We never look for that *surmaturité*, that New World style." Interestingly, he pointed out, he predicts that more and more producers will be doing that not necessarily for stylistic reasons, but rather as a hedge against smoke from increasingly frequent and violent fires. "Hanging it out there for that extra three weeks," he added, "every day it's out there, you're running the risk of smoke."

One of the advantages of picking when the grapes are ripe but not overripe is the maintenance of greater acidity, which is one of the keys to successful aging, even when it comes to red wines. As a result, "It's not necessarily that the wines are consistent in flavor profile," Crafton explained, but that they're reliably of high quality regardless of the vagaries of that particular vintage.

“Our philosophy here is, we’re trying to capture the light and the land of that year,” Barrett said. The key to achieving “our consistent quality,” he added, “is that if it’s a cold year like 2010 or ’11, I want it to be like the greatest Bordeaux wine we’ve ever made.” In other words, accepting the character of the vintage and allowing the wine to express it, as opposed to trying to craft a wine in a riper, more powerful style despite the fact that the fruit itself is not always inherently capable of producing something like that, is at the heart of their work. “So our consistency of quality is...



I’ve been very fortunate to taste my fair share of Chateau Montelena over the years, but exploring three whites and three reds, from three different decades and alongside Barrett and Crafton, showed just how profound an impact that philosophy has had on the wines not just in their youth, as the younger vintages of each demonstrated, but also in their maturity.

Indeed, even the Chardonnay from 2009 (in magnum, admittedly, which results in a slower aging process) and the Cabernet Sauvignon from 1991, both retained remarkable liveliness despite the 13 and 31 years of age, respectively.

That, it seems to me, is one of the key definitions of what sets the good apart from the great in the world of wine: A consistent ability to produce wines that are age-worthy and expressive of the year in which the grapes were grown, that embody the character of the land, and that have the potential to give immense pleasure both in their youth and through to whatever level of maturity they achieve.

The trick, Barrett and Crafton told me, is not fighting the conditions of any given year, but maximizing them in a way that is honest, that reflects the character of that particular harvest. To that end, “We’ve got the refined years, we’ve got the powerhouse years, and we’re going to go with the pitch and we’re going to swing at it to make the best we can,” Barrett said. “And it’s worked really well for us.” Vintage after vintage, he added, “we’ve wanted to be a statement of the place, the land, and the light that year.”

“We’d go crazy if we had to make the same wine every year,” Crafton concurred. That drive—to express the ineffable truth of any given year through the lens of each bottle—has propelled Chateau Montelena for half a century, lifting it to the upper echelons of the world of American wine. It promises to continue doing so for the next 50 years and beyond.

Below are my notes on the six wines we tasted—three Chardonnays and three Cabernet Sauvignons. In addition to these, Chateau Montelena crafted (and quickly sold out of) a special anniversary bottling of Chardonnay that is based on the three vineyards—John Muir Hanna Vineyard in Napa Valley, Bacigalupi Vineyard in Russian River Valley, and Belle Terre Vineyard in Alexander Valley—that were the source of fruit for the famous 1973 bottling that came out on top among the white wines at the famous 1976 Judgment of Paris. And while this particular one is no longer available, the team at Chateau Montelena has other (thus far secret) projects in the works.

Chateau Montelena Chardonnay 2009 (magnum)

This is majestic: Propulsive, concentrated, and so long on the finish. A deeply mineral nose, with lemon pith and hard apples, precedes a palate of hazelnuts, concentrated lemons, hard stone fruit, green apples, and amazing tensile strength. It fans out on the palate and yet never loses energy. Especially in this magnum format, it has another decade of life left...and likely a lot more.

Chateau Montelena Chardonnay 2014

So much richness and breadth, and great texture here, with hints of white peaches, nectarines, lemon blossoms, orange blossoms, honeysuckle, toast, Asian pears, and a touch of candy corn. This is at a great inflection point, with the exuberant fruit still present but with indications of maturity peeking through.

Chateau Montelena Chardonnay 2019

Beautiful, generous, and lengthy, with nectarines, yellow apples, honeysuckle, and slate-like minerality. It's taut yet dense, lively yet generous, and with another 20 years of life ahead.

Chateau Montelena Estate Cabernet Sauvignon 1991

Impeccably mature, redolent of freshly dug mushrooms, forest floor, cigar humidor and pencil shavings, currants, and cherry pits. These turn to a palate lifted with balsamic notes and chamomile, perfectly ripe plums, dried violets and lavender, leather, smoked meat, dried beef, and porcini broth. The tannins are fully resolved, lending each sip a distinctly silky character, yet there's plenty of energy still pulsing through it all. This is an absolute stunner.

Chateau Montelena Estate Cabernet Sauvignon 2007

Deliciously savory, with sarsaparilla notes alongside purple and black plums, brambly berries, a touch of creaminess to the black cherries, cedar and pencil lead, flowers, and blood oranges. Barrett explained that this has more polymerized tannins from the skins, as opposed to the stems and seeds in the 1991, and he believes that this will be "an order of magnitude better" than the 1991 when it's the same age, which is a mind-boggling thought given how excellent that one is, too.

Chateau Montelena Estate Cabernet Sauvignon 2017

So ripe and generous, bright and rich, with hints of red apples alongside cinnamon sticks, cloves, and caramel notes, blue fruit, blackberries, and cherries of serious purity and exuberance. It still needs a bit of time in the cellar, but it's a highly successful bottling from what Crafton called a "very technically challenging vintage," given the vacillations between cold and heat, and the added nightmare of fires. This is one for the cellar, but I expect remarkable things from this Cab as it evolves over time.

