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FOOD & DRINK 12/13/2015 @ 9:04AM | 5,214 views

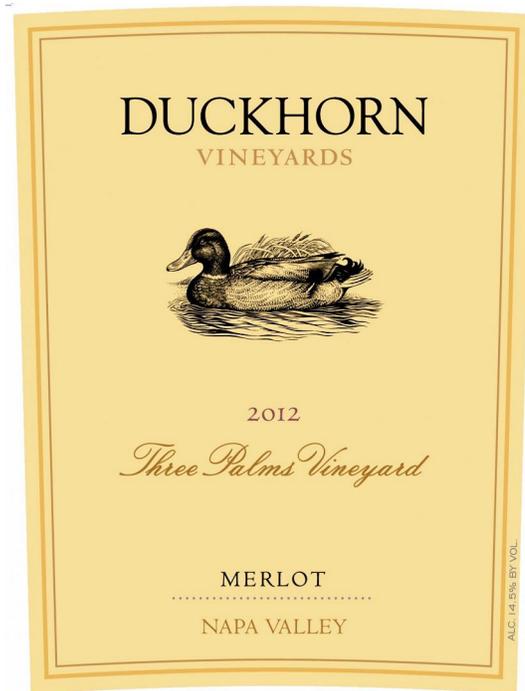
The Best California Merlot Ever

And, no, that's not an oxymoron, whatever you might think.



California Merlot has had a pretty rough ride since the 2004 movie *Sideways* savaged the varietal for being boring and insipid, and Miles had a point – there was an awful lot of awful Merlot around at the time, but it wasn't the grape's fault.

In Napa Valley's warm Mediterranean climate it's easy to make big, ripe boring Merlot, wine devoid of personality. But in the right location, and with the right approach, it can deliver very fine wine, and in one special vineyard, truly wonderful wine, the best California Merlot there is: [Duckhorn Vineyards](#)'s Three Palms vineyard in Calistoga.

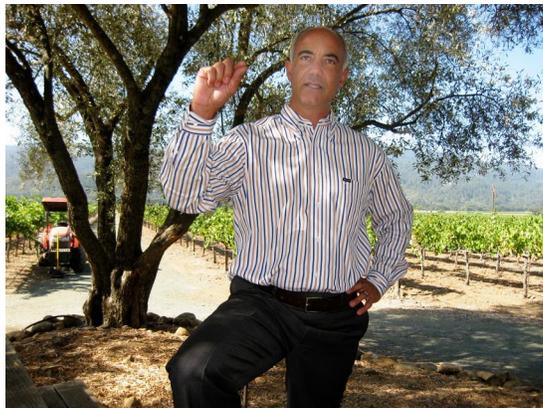


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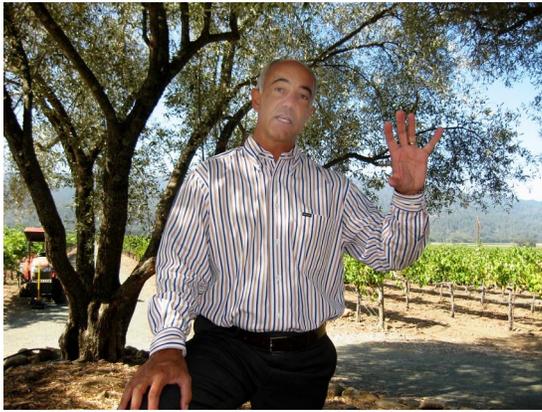


This reaffirms what every winemaker knows in his or her heart: great wine is all about location. And location. And location.



Alex Ryan

Alex Ryan, CEO of Duckhorn explains what makes Three Palms so special: “It’s a very, very rocky site, but in between the stones is a lot of loam and sand so it also has an element of nutritional value, so what you have is stress, but healthy vines. If you take that unique situationin most Napa Valley vineyards you either have stony hillside vineyards that have stressed vines, or you have loamy, fertile, valley floor soils that make lush, nice wines but not intense wines. Here we have a unique blend of the two.”



Alex Ryan

The importance of the vineyard or, as the French say, with more precision, the *terroir*, is obvious when I tasted the Duckhorn Three Palms Merlot 2008 (\$95/2012) beside the Duckhorn Estate Merlot 2006 (\$54/2012). Different vintages, I know, but what I was looking at was the way the two wines differed stylistically.



Alex Ryan

The Estate Merlot was made from a blend of juice from 50 different vineyards, from Carneros to Castiloga, all fermented separately. Pure and pretty, impeccably made, it was a pleasure to drink. It just lacked that extra dimension of Three Palms, the grip, the focus I've found in no other Merlot.



Barn at Three Palms

In many ways Three Palms is not that dissimilar to many other high-end Napa Merlots: it has tons of lush ripe fruit, is certainly extracted but not overly so by Napa standards, has pronounced but ripe tannins that require long aging, but all this you can find elsewhere. Three Palms goes beyond this with its unique heightened intensity.



Oh, it's certainly not Saint Emilion – the grapes spiritual home – thanks to the ripeness, but there's a level of complexity that you do find in the best wines of Bordeaux's right bank, but that's unique to Three Palms. And it comes, as always, from the soil.

Three Palms is so named because in the late 19th century the property was owned by San Francisco socialite Lillie Hitchcock Coit who planted the three trees. Considered too barren for pasture land it was bought in 1967 by brothers John and Sloan Upton. "They thought we were nuts," recalls Sloan. "City slickers planting a vineyard amongst the rocks!"



But their instinct was right – Three Palms is today one of the most celebrated vineyards in Napa Valley. “The Uptons got really lucky when they picked this site.” Ryan explains. “It was a cheap piece of property because it didn’t grow a lot of grass, so it wasn’t good for dairy and they were able to see through that and say ‘Yes, this may have some potential for grape vines that nobody else wanted to mess with because it was so difficult, so rocky, so expensive to manage. But in the end, for luxury winemaking, it turned out to be the magic potion.”

In 1992 one of the trees died and a replacement was shipped from southern California – expensive, I imagine, but you can’t have Three Palms Vineyard with only two palm trees.



There are two other factors that make Three Palms special. First, the average age of the vines is 20 years. Because of this, and the poor soil, they have dug down a deep 18 ft. so extract more of the flavor-enhancing minerality that makes great wine great.

Then there's the blend. The California wine industry made its mark early on by the innovative practice of selling varietally-labeled wines, a brilliant marketing coup, but one that does rather limit the winemaker's options. In contrast Duckhorn are a blending house, and up to 25% of Three Palms can be Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot. Ryan believes that "the site (Three Palms) gives soft Cabernet Sauvignon, but it still adds structure to the Merlot."

I'm a big fan of blending these varietals — each brings something different to the party, and the final blend is frequently better than the individual varietals alone. This is, after all, what they've been doing in Bordeaux for centuries with more than a little success.



Dan and Margaret Duckhorn

The Uptons had no interest in making wine and initially sold most of their fruit to nearby Sterling Winery, then owned by a predecessor of Diageo. Meanwhile, Dan and Margaret Duckhorn founded Duckhorn Vineyards in 1976 and started buying Three Palms fruit, making the first vintage in 1978.

At a tasting at Duckhorn the tenth anniversary vintage, the 1987, was disappointing. The fact that it had lasted 28 years is remarkable, and it showed lovely dusty notes of cedar and tobacco, but it lacked balance, was out of joint.



In contrast the 2008 was delectable. It had perfectly integrated acidity, was rounder and more approachable without any of the usual California Merlot flabbiness. Sexy and less austere than '87, the result of a cool, even-ripening summer and the evolution of California winemaking. Super seductive, but that's California Merlot for you □ what sets it apart is the structure, the solid-as-steel framework on which hangs this luxurious, ripe, velvety Merlot fruit.

By 2008 Diageo were getting out of the wine business – probably thought there was more profit in whisky – and the Uptons offered the rest of the product to Duckhorn, an offer the winery accepted with alacrity. Then, in the spring of 2015, wanting to retire, John and Sloan sold the property itself to Duckhorn.

At the tasting Duckhorn pulled off a little *coup de théâtre* by pairing the Three Palms 2011 with the famed, extremely rare and extremely expensive Pomerol Merlot, Petrus, from the same vintage.



The Three palms 2011 (\$100) was elegant and tinged with alluring aromatics. Very young at the moment, it will develop into a beguiling beauty.

In contrast the Petrus 2011 was shut down and disturbingly unfriendly. 2011 was a problematic year in Bordeaux, but this is a seriously great property so it could well evolve into something special, but for medium term drinking give me the Three Palms 2011 any day.

Now those of you with a mind as cynical as mine might just suspect that Duckhorn had picked this particular vintage for the comparison, and you could very well be correct. The results might have been different if it had been 2010, but it was a nice bit of showmanship, and shouldn't detract from how well the Three Palms showed.



The Visitor Center at Duckhorn Vineyards

The 2012 was more generous and welcoming, all lush, juicy fruit., and will make for fine drinking before the 2011.

The winery also poured their 2012 Napa Valley Merlot (\$55). Drinkable today, it will improve for a decade. Unadulterated, with no sense of manipulation, it was clean, simple and beautifully made, the LBD of wines with a clear purity of expression.

Actually, you can say this about all Duckhorn Vineyard's wines □ they are classic, not in the over-used sense of the word, a substitute for "quite good", but in the original sense of being "a work that is honored as definitive in its field."

And that about fits Duckhorn's Three Palms Merlot to a tee.

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