

Milestones for Rutherford Dust

THE RUTHERFORD DUST SOCIETY MARKS TWO DECADES WITH A GLORIOUS VINTAGE

by Deborah Parker Wong

Now that the proverbial dust has settled, the Rutherford Dust Society (RDS) has harnessed the dual efforts of its growers and winemakers and the influential consumer marketing efforts of its vintners together in a united front as the erstwhile Rutherford Appellation Wineries has merged with the RDS.

Alpha Omega Founder and current President of the Society, Michelle Baggett addressed a group of industry professionals gathered at the historic Inglenook winery for the AVA's 15th annual blind tasting of the much-anticipated 2012 vintage.

Baggett was joined by Master Sommelier Fred Dame, who directed the tasting along with panelists Andy Beckstoffer, Quintessa's Charles Thomas and the iconic Joel Aiken, who provided insights into the vintage and wine quality. The morning was a homecoming of sorts for Aiken, whose career as a winemaker began at Inglenook and was followed by his long tenure at Beaulieu from 1982 through 2009, when he retired to pursue his own label.

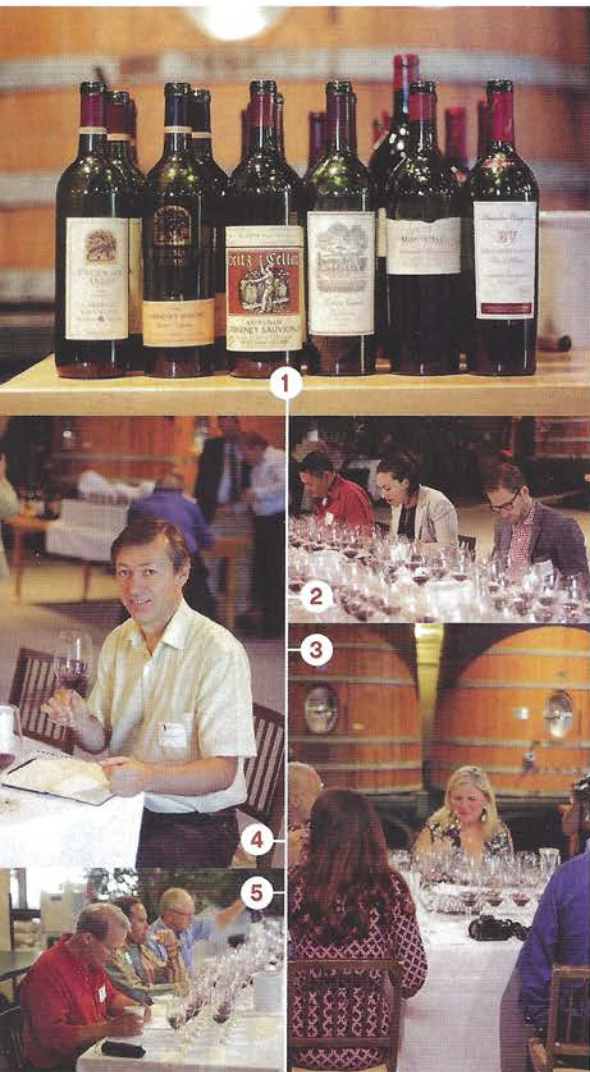
With the AVA fast approaching its 25th anniversary, the Society included a retrospective tasting of six Rutherford Cabernet Sauvignons from 1994. Beckstoffer commented that 1994 was "a major transition year for growers as they moved away from California sprawl and adopted different trellising systems." Dame noted that the wines showed considerable tartrate deposits on the corks and that there had been some bottle variation to contend with. In keeping with practices at the time, the target for alcohol was under 14 percent. Of the group, Aiken's Beaulieu Georges de Latour was the most youthful, with medium plus acid and tannins and a long, lean finish. Fennel, licorice and tea were markers present in almost every wine along with red fruit, leather and earth with wines from Heitz and Neibaum Coppola showing the darkest fruit and spicy, granular tannins.

"We waited patiently for this vintage," said Dame of 2012 as he acknowledged a handful of local sommeliers who were tasked with tasting through the 25 wines that had been submitted to select a lineup of 14 that they then ranked. Tasters were asked to evaluate the 2012 wines blind and then rank them using a ten-point scale. The reveal confirmed the observations made by Thomas that with clusters and berries that were ten to 20 percent larger than average, the vintage was somewhere between 1997 and 2005. Beckstoffer noted that overall yields were less than 2005, despite 2012 being a high-tonnage rebound year after a very "cold and sad" run from 2009 to 2011.

Characterized by generous black fruits—cassis, boysenberry and mulberry—and tightly-wound tannins, the most aromatic and open wines prevailed in the blind tasting, which provided an optimistic look at what awaits consumers as they begin their exploration of Rutherford's 2012 bounty.

Top Ten 2012 Cabernet Sauvignons

Hunnicut Beckstoffer Georges III Vineyard, Frank Family Winston Hill Vineyard, Frank Family Patriarch, Frank Family Reserve, Freemark Abbey Sycamore Vineyard, D. R. Stephens, Aiken, Martin Estate, Quintessa, Inglenook.



(1) A retrospective of six wines from the 1994 vintage kicked off the countdown as the AVA approaches its 25th anniversary. (2) Local sommeliers Eduardo Dingler of Morimoto (right) and Laura Koffer of Bottega, intent on tasting the 2012s. (3) PalateXposure's Ilona Thompson working her way through the 2012s. (4) Inglenook Winemaker Philippe Bascaules. (5) Rutherford experts all, panelists Charles Thomas, Andy Beckstoffer and Joel Aiken.