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Robert Whitley's Wine of the Year: 2008 Far Niente Cabernet Sauvignon

The Fabulous Five

Choosing a wine of the year is not something I take lightly. Over the course of the past 12 months I have tasted thousands of new wine releases. Most of them do not meet the threshold of character and quality to be considered for such a unique place in my heart. That's just the way it is. A wine of the year, anyone's wine of the year, should be a wine that so engaged the taster that its flavors and structure remained seared in the taster's memory long after the final sip.

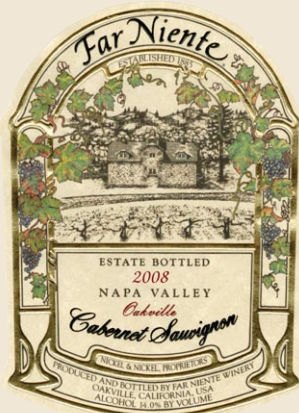
Over my more than 20 years as a wine journalist, I have found the decision usually makes itself. One or two wines, occasionally three, tend to stand out, clearly head and shoulders above the rest. This year there are five, the Fabulous Five.

The Fab Five are the 2008 Quintessa Napa Valley Red Wine (\$145), **2008 Far Niente Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$115), 2009 Freestone Quarter Moon Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$75), 2007 Jordan Cabernet Sauvignon (\$52) and Iron Horse "Joy" Blanc de Blancs (\$100).

There are a few things about my group of finalists that surprise even me. First, and perhaps most obvious, is the cost. None of the wines are what I would call a value wine. That said, if you consider **Far Niente**, Quintessa and Jordan to be in the same league with the very finest in classified-growth Bordeaux, then the prices don't seem so daunting. **If I had to choose between Chateau Cheval Blanc at \$1200 a bottle or Far Niente at \$115, I believe I would put my cash on the Far Niente.**

The second characteristic that you may notice about my group of finalists is this: They are all produced in California, two in the Napa Valley and three in neighboring Sonoma County. That is very unusual for this confirmed "Old World" wine palate. If you put me in a raft and pushed me out to sea and I could only have one wine to take with me, it would be an Italian red, folks; probably a Barolo or a Brunello.

So that brings me to the most obvious question: why? Why is the Fabulous Five California-centric? The common thread between the five, for me, is that all five represent the finest wines I have ever tasted from these producers. Each wine is an impressive accomplishment from an accomplished producer. Each wine is a triumph unto itself.



I remember tasting the Far Niente. I was working side by side with my top assistant, Rich Cook, as we made our way through a large flight of red-wine samples. We generally work at a different pace and almost never taste the same wine at the same time.

On this day I tasted a gorgeous Cabernet and my head snapped back as if on a string. I turned to Rich, who was having a similar reaction, and we both pointed at the same bottle and uttered in unison: "Oh my God!" It was the 2008 Far Niente Cab. I probably don't need to explain that Far Niente has been making remarkable Cabernet Sauvignon for about three decades, but I can certainly tell you this is the best one I've ever tasted, and I've had just about all of them.

At yet another samples tasting I hit upon the voluptuous 2008 Quintessa, which is about as sensual as a red wine could ever be, and I thought I must have tasted my wine of the year then and there. As we often do, I invited friends to stop by the office and snag some of the leftover wines from the day of tasting. I pushed everyone in the direction of the Quintessa and they were more than happy to imbibe.

Eventually the Quintessa was gone and we stood around staring at each other in wonder, all thinking the same thing: How do we top that? As it happened, I had a bottle of the 2007 Jordan Cabernet Sauvignon from Alexander Valley in my computer bag, a bottle that was left over from the Critics Challenge International Wine Competition, where it won a gold medal.

I opened it and shared with the assembled crowd. I've been a fan of Jordan Cab since the very first vintage I tasted, which I believe was the 1978. In all of those years I had not tasted a Jordan Cab that was so profound right out of the bottle. It stood out right alongside the brilliant 2008 Quintessa. I was stunned.

My reaction to Freestone's 2009 Quarter Moon Vineyard Pinot Noir was similar, though for different reasons. I had been under the strong impression that this new winery in the Sonoma Coast appellation would ultimately become renowned for its striking Chardonnays. Outstanding Pinot Noir from California is becoming rather common. Outstanding Chardonnay is rare, so the very best tend to stand out and make their mark more easily and quickly.

Freestone's Quarter Moon Vineyard Pinot, however, is a wine that speaks to a specific place, with its own unique personality. The '09 exhibits structure, flavor intensity, and a white pepper spice note that is both unique and compelling. It will give the Freestone Chardonnays a run for their money.

And finally, near the end of this very good year in California wine, I tasted a sparkling wine from the Green Valley of the Russian River Valley that should put Champagne on notice that it doesn't own the patent on exceptional bubbly.

That would be Iron Horse's "Joy," which is a multi-vintage blanc de blancs cuvee that is typically aged on the lees 10 to 15 years prior to disgorgement. It is only sold in magnum, so at \$100 retail that comes out to \$50 per 750ml, and worth every penny.

It is rich, creamy and toasty, beautifully structured, and exhibits exceptional length, very much after the fashion of a tetes de cuvee from a top Champagne house. The "Joy" cuvee I tasted was bottled in 1997 and disgorged in July of this year. It is not only the finest sparkling wine I've tasted from Iron Horse, it's the finest California sparkling wine I've ever tasted. Period.

These are my memories. And memories are what a wine of the year is made of.

Now, the envelope please. My 2011 wine of the year, after careful deliberation, is the 2008 Far Niente Cabernet Sauvignon, which is sourced primarily from the Martin Stelling Vineyard in Oakville, in the sweet spot of the Napa Valley.

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