

2011 Napa Valley: A First Look

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There are few things I enjoy more than tasting wines in their separate components, before blending starts taking place. In my opinion, this is the best way to start learning about wines as they move from their formative stages into preliminary blends and then final blends before going into bottle. Tasting through multiple blocks of a single property is also the best way to truly appreciate the distinct qualities of Napa Valley's top vineyards, sites that are as privileged as any in the world. All of the wines in this article were tasted in late April/early May 2012. This is by no means a comprehensive list of top wines or wineries, but only a small representation of the 2011 vintage. I will have a much deeper look at the 2011s in our December issue.

The 2011 vintage gave growers fits pretty much the entire year. The most critical early moment of the year was probably the heavy rains that fell in June, which created high amounts of shatter and lowered potential yields dramatically. I arrived in Napa Valley in mid-October, just after the second of three rain events that would test the mettle of even the most experienced winemakers and viticulturists. Sorting was especially intense, something that was easy to see by the large amount of fruit quality-minded producers discarded at the sorting table. I have no doubt there will be fabulous 2011s, but making them will likely require equally Draconian selection in the cellar prior to bottling.

Kapcsandy

My tasting at Kapcsandy was fascinating. I tasted a wide range of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot blocks from a number of different barrels, plus preliminary blends of the main blocks on the property. I was amazed at just how different the same fruit behaved in barrels from a range of coopers. It was literally night and day, even within the same blocks. Today the wines are in a very embryonic stage, so I can only offer a general impression. The best components have incredible finesse and refinement. The overall quality of the 2011s will come down to decisions made at blending time. The ingredients are certainly there for this to be a strong vintage. The attention to every detail at Kapcsandy is truly amazing, something that was quite evident when I visited the estate during the 2011 harvest.