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The Business End by Paul Franson Archive Contact

# Top wine stories of 2011

Story Discussion

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Paul Franson | Posted: Thursday, January 5, 2012 9:30 pm | (0) Comments

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The start of a year is a good time to take a look at the top wine stories of last year. These aren't only from Napa Valley, but most apply here as well as to the wine business as a whole in the United States.

## Light and lean

2011 was a weird year. Early rains discouraged pollination of grape buds, and Napa growers are not used to leaving extra canes on just in case to be trimmed later like they do in many areas. Then a cool year delayed ripening. All in all, it's a year that will prove who the talented winemakers are. Overall, yield is down about 20 percent, records show.

## Sales back but prices stall

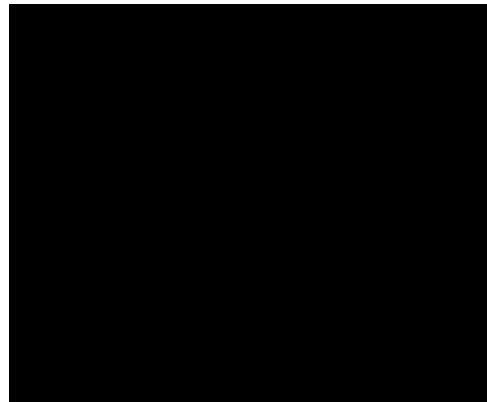
Sales have recovered from disastrous 2008 and 2009, but there are many indications that prices of many wines have been reset downward. Sales of over-\$20 wines grew fast — but many of them might be formerly \$50 wines priced at \$35. The toughest category is \$40 to \$100, prime territory for Napa cabernets.

## Happy growers

Low yields across the state meant growers could sell everything they had — at higher prices. The glut of the past few years has evaporated (or been drunk) and few people have planted many more vines.

## No new bugs

Fast-working ag advisers, officials and growers seem to have whipped recent threats and no new ones have emerged — yet. The old pests remain, however, but in control.



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### Moscato and sweet red wine

Completely irreverent to 99 percent of Napa wineries, the nation's thirst for sweetish Muscat wines and sweet red blends has provided a bonanza for the other 1 percent, especially the Trinchero family. As usual, it's ahead of popular trends with its Sutter Home Moscato and Menage a Trois red.

### Unoaked chardonnay

Though Napa is still famed for oaky buttery chardonnays, a rejection of these wines by many consumers have let to popularity for unoaked (or lightly oaked) chardonnay more like its Chablis antecedents.

### Virginia and local wine

The local wines now produced in every other state are gaining adherents — and some of the wines are good by any standard. Virginia, in particular, is finally realizing Thomas Jefferson's dreams. The trend is unlikely to harm Napa wineries. It will increase the demand overall, and wine production remains more challenging and expensive in most other states. Plus, those wineries talk to their local Congress members about issues important to Napa, too.

### Alternative varieties

Grapes from albariño to zinfandel are grown in Napa and made into wine here, too. None is likely to unseat cabernet and its cousins, but many of these wines are excellent, and some may turn out to be real winners. Realistically, however, most will likely be grown in cheaper regions that produce excellent grapes, too.

### Alternate packaging

Screwcaps have proven their worth, aseptic cartons, bags in boxes and plastic bottles are all finding their niches, and even kegs are becoming more popular in restaurants and bars.

I thought they'd primarily be used for inexpensive good house wines — an unknown commodity in Napa Valley — but they are instead being used to further the locavore lust for local wines, often unique wines from small producers. New Tarla is the latest with wine on tap — two from Long Meadow Ranch and one from Raymond.

### Jean-Charles Boisset

You can't pick up a wine publication without reading the latest from the charming Frenchman: First, he bought DeLoach in Sonoma County, then sleepy Raymond Vineyards here and turned it in to a top visitor attraction. Then he bought venerable Buena Vista Winery in Sonoma and is restoring its luster and highlighting its heritage.

He cut a deal with Lockwood in Monterey County, opened a chic wine bar in Healdsburg, bought the large French wine empire of the Skalli family (but not its St. Supéry here). He also married Gina Gallo, uniting two wine empires as in the days of yore by fathering twin girls. Then he and Gina bought the mountaintop home of the late king of the American wine business, Robert Mondavi.

### District 4 tasting lounge offers blending

District 4 tasting room has opened in the former Winery X space across from Grace's Table at 1405 Second St. in Napa.

The winery, whose name is an homage to the official designation of Napa County as California's fourth viticultural region, showcases wines made by some of the many wineries that make wine at the Bin to Bottle custom winery south of Napa.

The lounge also offers a custom Build a Blend program in which customers can blend a wine to their taste and have it bottled and labeled with their names.

The lounge is across the street from the Uptown Theatre, and hopes to attract both audience members and performers to hang out before and after shows, even during intermissions.

The managing partner of District 4 is John Wilkinson, who also serves that role at Bin to Bottle. James DeLuca is the manager of District 4.

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Four Bin to Bottle customers pour their wines in the lounge:

- Fulcrum, a Pinot Noir producer
- Textbook, from Jonathon Pey of Pey-Marin wines, with Old World-style Cabernet
- Match Vineyard from Randy and Sasha Sloan, where Cary Gott is the winemaker, with a big Cab
- X-Winery

All are small — fewer than 500 cases per year — except X, and it will pour only its small Amicus brand. Wilkinson expects a few other wineries to join in.

The lounge will play music from performing bands on show nights at the Uptown and invites performers to blend wines, too, hoping they'll hang out and talk to fans.

District 4 will be open noon to 8 p.m. daily, until midnight or later on show nights. For details, call 254-4906.

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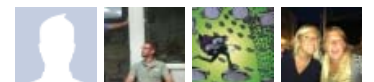
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