

Cab Comparo

OUR NYC PANEL BLIND-TASTES PASO ROBLES CABERNETS AGAINST PEERS FROM NAPA AND BORDEAUX

by Lana Bortolot / photos by Doug Young

team captain: Mike Madrigale, Head Sommelier Bar Boulud/Boulud Sud, NYC



Our Paso panelists were (left to right): Jared Hooper, Faith & Flower (Los Angeles); Darius Allyn, MS, most recently of Giada at the Cromwell Hotel (Las Vegas); team captain Mike Madrigale, Head Sommelier Bar Boulud, Boulud Sud (New York City); Paul Coker, Michael Mina's Stonehill Tavern at the St. Regis (Monarch Beach, CA); Naureen Zaim of Smoke.Oil.Salt (West Hollywood, CA); Augustus Miller, of recently closed Charlie Palmer (Costa Mesa, CA); and Terence Leavey, Spago Beverly Hills.

- 1 Team captain Mike Madrigale, 2 Darius Allyn, MS,
3 Paul Coker, 4 Naureen Zaim, 5 Augustus Miller,
6 Terence Leavey, 7 Jared Hooper.



This spring, the Quaff Report hit the road at the invitation of the Paso Robles CAB (Cabernet and Bordeaux) Collective to evaluate Cabernet Sauvignons from near and far at its three-day “CABs of Distinction” trade event. The Collective, whose mission is to promote the Bordeaux varieties for which Paso Robles is becoming known, includes 24 family-owned member wineries, most of which produce fewer than 5,000 cases a year.

Long known for its Rhône varietals and blends, Paso Robles—one of California’s larger AVAs, with 614,000 acres, 32,000 of which are under vine—has made great inroads with Bordeaux varieties, which now exceed 55% of all wine grapes from the region. Our task: blind taste through six Cabernets from unidentified regions to arrive at an understanding of these hyper-local blends and how they compare to other great Cabs of the world.

Six California sommeliers joined panel captain Mike Madrigale for the blind tasting:

Darius Allyn, MS, most recently of Giada at the Cromwell Hotel (Las Vegas); Paul Coker, Michael Mina’s Stonehill Tavern at the St. Regis (Monarch Beach); Jared Hooper, Faith & Flower (Los Angeles); Terence Leavey, Spago Beverly Hills; Augustus Miller, of recently closed Charlie Palmer (Costa Mesa); and Naureen Zaim of Smoke.Oil.Salt (West Hollywood).

After Mike thanked the audience “for coming to watch us taste wine,” he advised the panel on house rules: “Tell us what you taste and if you like it or not. We’re not trying to find aromas of freshly cut garden hose or things like that—we are just tasting the wine on its merits.”

As the panel tasted through the six samples, a recurring theme was the increasingly narrow gap between Old and New World wines as each borrows characteristics such as restraint, fruit and acid, from the other. “In New versus Old World, you used to be able to say who [was] winning that battle between fruit and earth,” Paul noted. “I think across the board something we tend to see in Cabernet-dominant wines is heavy use of oak, and none of these are screaming oak. I think they all sort of celebrate the fruit itself rather than what’s been done in the winery.”

Mike agreed, saying in most of the wines, “Over the last couple of years or so there’s been kind of a change where you find Old World wines tasting quite fruity and less mineral and the New World wines trying to get that . . . tannic structure and acidity.”

That was demonstrated in what turned out to be the unanimous surprise of the tasting: the Château-Léoville Barton Saint-Julien, which expressed such a bright aspect with eucalyptus and sleek graphite tones, that everyone was convinced it was a Napa mountain AVA. Mike noted its “very fresh, mentholy-black fruit,” and Darius commented on the crossover between Old and New World attributes.

“There’s a lot of mineral flavor coming out of this, and that tobacco . . . savory, leather tone and olive. It seems like Napa fruit to me because of the ripeness—maybe not as complex as wine number one on the palate, but a lot of flavor,” Darius said. Upon the reveal, he noted that Léoville was known for a

more modern approach than other Bordeaux producers.


The Napa wines, however, often baffled the panel. The Dominus showed both vegetal and fruit ripeness that few understood, except Darius, the group's Master Sommelier. "This is the most obvious wine of the flight for me: this is Transylvania Cabernet from Romania," he jested.

Puzzled by the pyrazine aspect, most agreed the wine was nonconformist. Jared noted, "The signature on this feels different from the others . . . [and] in that befuddlement, I'm enjoying it. But what's your sign, baby?"

The panel was split on Insignia's identity. Mike, Darius and Paul shifted to Napa after a discussion of tannins and minerality (amplified, heady and clean). But the dark spice and tart fruit profile expressed Paso to the others. Terence was swayed by the front attack: "It just really sits on your lips and right up in the front—gives you a little bit of a pucker—but it does have some dark spices to it that always seem to be very centric to Paso." For Naureen, it was the "lower acid and lighter body" that she thought might express Paso sub-appellations Santa Margarita Ranch or the Highlands on the east.

Uniformly, the two Paso wines were identifiable for their acidity, and integration of deep spice, oak and fleshy fruit. While the panel found JUSTIN "fresh, bright and acid-driven"—a wine of "balanced extremes," DAOU's Soul of a Lion was heady with oak and fruit that pushed ripeness. "There's a lot of complexity there, and you can keep on drinking and smelling this wine and find new flavors," Augustus said.

"I think with all these wines they are from where they come from, and for me, that is the most important part about wine . . . that [it] is honest to its origins," Mike said. He praised the quality of the panelists and the wines, even exulting in the times they were puzzled.

"That's the idea. We don't know everything. You're tasting it on its merit rather than looking at the label." 



QUAFFING CABS

In order of tasting, our panel powered through six Cabernets from California and Bordeaux.



1. Château Ducru-Beaucaillou 2010 Saint-Julien, Bordeaux (\$225) 90% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Merlot

Complexity beyond fruit: "savory, an earthy aspect—like organic, turned earth." "The acidity really kept it going . . . a tautness to this." "It has a little lift, freshness and in harmony." "A little bit tart but still very juicy, really pretty."

2. JUSTIN 2010 Isosceles Reserve, Adelaida, Paso Robles (\$100) 90% Cabernet Sauvignon, 5% Malbec, 3% Cabernet Franc, 2% Merlot "Velvety tannins are really conducive to pairing with a lot of different dishes." "Spicier, oakier, more rounded out, easy to drink right now." "Deep spice that is also linked to the earth. Good structure and it won't fall down." "Very velvety, floral, a lot of ripe blueberry, plum—very delicious."

3. Château Léoville-Barton 2010 Saint-Julien, Bordeaux (\$155) 77% Cabernet Sauvignon, 21% Merlot and 2% Cabernet Franc Showing both flashy New World attributes such as "very fresh, mentholy-black mountain fruit," and more restrained Old World character: "graphite and cigar box notes and dust . . . Great mineral, quite tannic, chewy . . ."



4. Joseph Phelps 2010 Insignia, Napa Valley (\$170) 84% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Petit Verdot, 4% Merlot, 2% Malbec

A "rich-structured, amplified style of Cabernet, which is good, while not being over the top." "A headiness to the finish so it seems more New World on the palate, although it has some of the Old World attributes." "Super clean, very well-crafted wine—well done."

5. DAOU Vineyards & Winery 2010 Soul of the Lion, Adelaida, Paso Robles (\$100) 84% Cabernet Sauvignon, 12% Cabernet Franc, 8% Merlot, 6% Petit Verdot

"Ripe, concentrated fruit . . . a little saline, olive. Pretty complex on the mid-palate . . . intense oak spice—heavy and warm. . . a bit of bay leaf, a little coffee; really complex, a well-made wine—structured and very fruit-forward." "Really fun and sexy textures." "Modern in style, big, not out of line, not out of balance." "They did a good job of pushing the line but not going over it."

6. Dominus Estate 2010, Napa Valley (\$250) 95% Cabernet Sauvignon, 5% Petit Verdot

"Almost like the most overripe and underripe wine you'll get at the same time—an interesting contrast . . . a tricky wine to place, not necessarily fitting a traditional profile of a specific place." "Definitely a bipolar quality to this wine." "Well-crafted wine, but showing a lot of greenness."