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Northern California Wines Greeted Well In Bordeaux



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Travel

I write about lifestyle, food and wine from a base in France



Vines in Napa Valley GETTY

In March of 2020 I flew from Bordeaux to San Francisco to visit friends in the Napa Valley wine country. The plan was to stay for a week. On arrival in the U.S., a customs officer mentioned how all passenger flights into the U.S. would be halted the next day due to Covid-19 precautions.

Three days later, generous hosts in Napa woke me early. They provided a warning that Europe would soon disallow incoming flights, and suggested that I drive to the airport immediately and catch the first flight out. Their advice was sage: I did so, arriving back in France only a day before the airspace was shuttered to international flights.

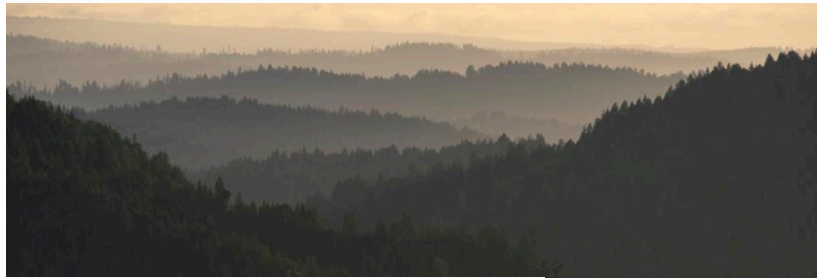
During those brief days in California I visited a handful of wineries and found that Napa wines—many teeming with tannins a decade and a half earlier—were back on track again with regard to variety and quality: layered and complex taste profiles now eclipse memories of any past, fleeting regard the region may have had for the puckering power of brash tannins. Up and down the valley (by latitude as well as by altitude) quality endures—not by dint of marketing ploys but by generations of dedicated growers paying fastidious attention to climate and soils. That, combined with focused cellar craftsmanship, produces wines that can please now, and often can endure for decades.

The waning of the pandemic is evident now in northern California—with the unemployment rate [dropping from 6.2% to 5.5%](#) in Napa Valley between April and May this year. Quiet days of an economic pause are being replaced anew with notable financial transactions—such as Francis Ford Coppola’s [announced sale of his iconic winery](#) to Delicato Family Wines. Degrees of frivolity also emerge—with post-lockdown socializing increasing the [sale of \\$500 bottles](#) in Napa Valley.

Months ago, friends sent California wines here to France to sample—knowing that travel to their state from out of country was restricted. Some of these vintages were made by Californians [with historical ties](#) to Bordeaux winemaking (Chris Phelps studied in Bordeaux and performed his internship at Château Pétrus in Pomerol; Robin Lail’s association with Robert Mondavi brought her in close contact with Bordeaux *vignerons*.)

Local Bordeaux winemakers and sommeliers gathered together to sample these wines. Overall—they provided enthusiastic approval for these slightly more hot climate vintages from their professional California cohort. This sharing of boxes and bottles (across oceans and continents) during a period when few humans could make that journey only appeared to enhance mutual ties, and respect, between Napa and Bordeaux winemakers.

Below are selected tasting notes.



Coastal Range of Mendocino County, California, USA. GETTY

Lail Vineyards. Georgia. Sauvignon Blanc. Napa Valley. 2018. (97 points)

Named after the first member of the sixth generation of the Lail family—Georgia Eileen—this wine includes lip smacking aromas of lime, mint, gooseberries, a little flint and wet beach stones. In the mouth this precise and focused wine has rich and delicate tropicals mid-palate, a pleasantly oily mouth feel, and includes a little mint and even butterscotch on the finish. A light, almost ethereal winner. Wow. Pair with anchovies or a meringue dessert.

Lail Vineyards. Blueprint. Sauvignon Blanc. Napa Valley. 2019. (97 points)

Zesty aromas of grapefruit, mandarins, green apples, wet minerals and the scent of an olive grove. Deliciously semi-sweet and open in the mouth with succulent and embracing acidity that lingers on the finish. Enjoy with sashimi, or even a creamy cheese. Time in a bottle.



Blueprint Cabernet Sauvignon LAIL VINEYARDS

Lail Vineyards. J. Daniel Cuvée. Cabernet Sauvignon. Napa Valley. 2018. (99 points)

Deep purple and ash color from this 15.3% alcohol Cabernet Sauvignon. Aromas are rich, compact, earthy and approachable. Seriously succulent, sun touched fruit on the nose. In the mouth a beautifully light and ephemeral but focused treasure chest of black and red fruit, mint chocolate cake and unobtrusive tannins and succulent acidity. This well crafted, well balanced wine is the apogee of a winemaker's craft. Pair with wild game and roasted sage coated potatoes.

Lail Vineyards. Blueprint. Cabernet Sauvignon. Napa Valley. 2018. (99 points)

The name is a tribute to Jon Lail's architectural design achievements in the wine world. A rich set of aromas: brownies, plums, and even Bartlett pairs with the acidity, as well as mocha and sultanas. In the mouth, a commanding and royal flush of rich, velvety juice with a well-structured tannic backbone. A hint of cocoa on the attack, followed by raspberries, plums and Christmas cake mid-palate, followed by a finish with a dab of lime and menthol. This is a three course meal in itself; serve with roast beef, oxtail soup or lamb with au gratin potatoes. A truly extraordinary, well crafted, beautiful wine. A song in a bottle.

