

PREMIUM

Jonathan Cristaldi: my top fine wines of 2022

While legendary bottles like a 1974 Heitz rivalled a 1967 Beaulieu Vineyard Georges de Latour, Cristaldi takes a pensive track through personal favourites from Santa Barbara to Napa, Sonoma, and Champagne.



Jonathan Cristaldi

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In February, I sampled Kosta Browne's groundbreaking Burgundy project and wrote **an exclusive** for Decanter.

In March, I wound up at Beaulieu Vineyard thanks to Gary Rieschel, whose Auction Napa Valley winning bid unlocked the doors to a weekend of drinking—not sampling—Georges de Latour Cabernet bottles dating back to 1967.

In May, vintner Tor Kenward of TOR treated a small gathering at Wheeler Farms in Saint Helena to wines from his cellar: a 1945 Beringer Red that, topped up in 1993, tasted of dark fruit, tobacco, walnuts, raisins and was salty and briny and quite alive! A 1974 Heitz Napa Valley was remarkable, and Tor claimed it was a Martha's Vineyard bottling, but 'they ran out of labels,' he said. It was all cured meat, tobacco, black olive, and liquorice.

Beyond Napa

So many of these tastings and bottles should qualify as my year's top wines. But I've focused on my favourite producers, most consumed at home in Novato in the San Francisco Bay Area, mere miles from the Sonoma County border.

I love Sonoma wines. I can't get enough of Benovia, Three Sticks, Merry Edwards, and Conven (Dan Kosta's new project). My adoration for California wine extends south into Santa Barbara, the Santa Ynez Valley, and Sta. Rita Hills.

I drained many bottles of Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, and Syrah from Dragonette Cellars and Liquid Farm—pleading at times for bottles of Liquid Farm's Champagne—a collaboration with Pertois-Moriset in Le Mesnil-sur-Ogier.

But my standout wine of the year was a 2012 **Matthiasson** Napa Valley Red enjoyed at a home in St. Helena. While the winery's Claret-like, elegant, age-worthy reds show restraint in their youth, winemaker Steve Matthiasson's focus on early picks and higher natural acidities means the wines age beautifully. At ten years of age, this 2012 is finally moving from restraint to a veritable fireworks show.

Finding focus

Above all, 2022 was a year to recalibrate and find focus in wine writing. I would be remiss not to express my gratitude to the talented editorial team at Decanter for all their support and honouring me with the responsibility of becoming Decanter's Napa correspondent.

From what I've seen and tasted living in the San Francisco Bay Area these past seven years, Napa's light – and the light from around California's wine regions – is burning brighter by the hour. The early power brokers who have shaped it are now fine-tuning it. Its aura is a seductive siren calling for a battery of new onlookers, chroniclers, vintners, and hospitality mavens, all looking for a piece of the action – some for better, some for worse.

Whatever the near future holds, that California light is shining bright. I carried it with me on a recent visit to the east coast to see Chris Bischoff, an old New York City friend who has planted vines on a steep hillside in New York State's Upper Hudson Valley.

From his cabin in Cambridge, New York, peering out a bay window, we could see the vines he'd planted five years earlier and vast swaths of rolling hills beyond them. I brought a bottle of **Jesse Katz's** 2018 Devil Proof Malbec from the

Alexander Valley – talk about rays of light.

We talked for hours about this doppelgänger of a wine and its effusive neon beams of structure. It seemed to morph minute by minute in the glass as Bischoff, and I tracked the setting sun over shapely hills, themselves changing colours, their shapes shifting as nightfall draped each snow-covered hilly crest in new angles and forms.

As Katz is fond of saying, ‘Live well, drink well, and the devil can’t get ya.’

Jonathan’s top wines of 2022



Matthiasson, Napa Valley Red Wine, Napa Valley, 2012)

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For elegant, finesse-driven styles of Napa red wines that are almost Claret-like, Matthiasson is the ticket. After 10 years of bottle age, this gorgeous red opens with soft aromatics that build with intensity after time in the glass. A heady mix of blackberry, plum, and deep forest...

Points 98

DVO, Napa Valley Red, Napa Valley, California, USA, 2019

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Only the second release of this collaboration project between Dalla Valle Vineyards of Napa Valley and Ornellaia of Tuscany. A glass-staining dark ruby colour. Gorgeous red berry fruit aromas, white pepper, lavender, graphite, tobacco and sweet cedar. Full-bodied with immense concentration and exuding sweet black fruit and cassis, fragrant wild...

Points 98



Lail Vineyards, Georgia, Napa Valley, California, USA, 2019

Fragrant aromas of toasted Marcona almonds, vanilla, and apricot cream. The palate is expressive and the barrel-fermentation layers in silky textures but doesn't cover the bright citrus and stone fruit. There's a gravelly-like mineral thread that carries through on a very...

Points 96



Alta Colina, Old 900, Paso Robles, Adelaida District, 2019

One of the most delicious wines I've ever had from Paso Robles' Adelaida District. Lavish candied violet aromas tinged with cracked black pepper, full-bodied and layered with silky black fruit and cherry liqueur flavours. The mid-palate finds itself weighted down by a deep, earthy, crushed-stone mineral element, flooded with robust...

Points 96



Dragonette, John Sebastiano Vineyard, Santa Barbara County

Winemaker Brandon-Sparks Gillis shows what high elevation John Sebastiano Vineyard Syrah planted at 274 metres Syrah is capable of in this pure-fruited, mineral-driven, energetic red. Open-top fermenters, with 15% whole cluster and 2-3 days of cold soak with native yeast...

Points 96



Liquid Farm, Blanc de Blancs, Champagne, France

Liquid Farm owner Jeff Nelson partnered with Champagne Pertois-Moriset, a producer based in the Côte des Blancs. This 100% Grand Cru Chardonnay is from Le Mesnil-sur-Ogier. Produced in Champagne and imported to the US by Liquid Farm. Disgorged in January 2022 with a dosage of 2.5g/l. Golden in colour, with...



Points 95

Convène, Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast, 2019

Dan Kosta, of Kosta Browne fame (the iconic Pinot producer he co-founded is now owned by Duckhorn Wine Co.), launched this new project in 2022. The inaugural releases are all appellation blends crafted by winemaker Shane Finley. This Sonoma Coast Pinot was a real...



Points 94

Benovia, Russian River Valley Chardonnay, Sonoma County

Winemaker and co-owner Mike Sullivan has produced one of the best-value Russian River Chardonnays on the market. Chardonnay grapes are sourced from Martaella Estate and Zio Tony Ranch, whole cluster pressed and fermented with indigenous yeasts, aged 13 months in 34% new French oak. The result is a Chardonnay you...

Points 94



Merry Edwards, Russian River Valley Pinot Noir, Sonoma

Winemaker Heidi von der Mehden is doing a terrific job keeping the standards high with this iconic label. This Russian River Pinot was 100% de-stemmed, and whole berries were added to the fermenter. Cold soak lasted roughly seven days, and the wine was aged 10 months sur lie...

Points 93



Inglenook, Blancaneaux, Rutherford, Napa Valley, California, 2020

From the Coppola family's Inglenook comes this estate-grown Viognier, Marsanne, and Roussanne blend, an agile and refreshing white, aged eight months sur lie in stainless and 40% french oak. Golden-hued in colour, lovely tropical fruit and orange blossom notes leap from the glass. Creamy on entry with a luscious mouthfeel...



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