

FROM THE GRAPEVINE

BY JOEL M. FISHER



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For many in the Los Angeles cuisine and wine trades, the holiday season kicked off with the Escoffier Dinner, the annual gourmet event put on by the [Les Amis d'Escoffier](#) and the [American Culinary Federation's Chef De Cuisine Association of California](#). The dinner was held at the [Regency Club Los Angeles](#) and was beautifully executed under the talented direction of [Executive Chef Patrick Jamon](#). I had the honor and privilege of once again pairing wines to go with the courses. Some of my favorite and most interesting pairings proved to be the *vol au vent* and mushrooms with a *Nobilo 2002 Icon Sauvignon Blanc* from New Zealand, the *timbale de sole* with the *Vinacola Hidalgo Napoleon Amontillado*, and squab with a *2000 Chateau Reynella Shiraz* (ranked 90 by the Wine Spectator).

Now, here we are in 2004. Let me take this opportunity to wish all of you a happy new year. May it be full of health, happiness and good wine.

So with that last thought in mind and new resolution list in hand, I'd like to kick off the new year by introducing you to a handful of noteworthy wineries to try. Perhaps exploring these new and notable wines will make it onto your resolution list as well.

Napa's [Artesa](#) specializes in handcrafted wines, guided by the gifted hand of winemaker Don van Saaveren. The *2001 Carneros* (\$25) displayed a lovely fruity nose and a great taste, and the velvety *1999 Merlot* (\$25, made from Sonoma grapes) was loaded with round fruit tones but not too many tannins.

The congenial [Livingston-Moffett](#) had nice Chardonnays, and downright great reds. Their *1999 Moffett Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon* (\$55) was a very distinctive Bordeaux-style red notable for its smoothness. Also remarkably good was the *2000 Gemstone* (\$40), a 70% Cabernet, 19% Merlot and 6% Cabernet Frank blend.

I met Amelia Ceja of [Ceja Vineyards](#) in Napa last summer at the Family Winemakers of California road show in Pasadena. The Ceja family has an impressive history that has stretched from farm workers to winery owners in Napa's Carneros District. Their *Vino de Casa* (\$18) is a crisp, non-malalactic blend of Chardonnay, Pinot Gris and Viognier. It's quite enjoyable overall. The balanced *2001 Pinor Noir* (\$38) is an intense bottle with dark fruit and spices on the palate and tropical fruit on the nose, but manages to retain

both polish and finesse. It should age well. The *Vino de Casa Red* (\$18), like the white, is also a blend. The Merlot, Pinot Noir and Syrah mix is a fun wine that accompanies a wide range of food nicely. Similarly, the *1999 Merlot* (\$32) is also a food wine, and has been called a superb California Pomerol. With strong black cherry and cassis flavors, this is a subtle, elegant and smooth bottle. Last but not least comes the *2000 Ceja Cabernet Sauvignon* (\$38), a big wine with fruit forward, a hint of raisin, and softer tannins. This bottle should age nicely for at least ten years.

The Napa winery of [Koves-Newlan](#) is working hard to retain the character of a small, family-owned winery while raising the bar on the quality of its products. The vineyard has more than 40 acres planted with Pinot Noir, Merlot, Cabernet sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Malbec and Petite Verdot, and the winery focuses on estate wines. Production right now is fairly small, between 10,000 and 15,000 cases annually, but the owners are committed to slowly expanding production to 30,000 per year. Of note are the *1999 Merlot* (\$20), which had nice fruits and a big nose, and the *1999 Cabernet Sauvignon* (\$25), which had ripe, soft notes and solid tannins. Also worth checking out are the *1999 Cabernet Bardessono Vineyard* (\$25) – which has a nice body, a long finish, and cherry and berry fruits forward – and the zingy little *2000 Zinfandel* (\$22), which comes from a 100-year old vineyard.

Further north in Napa Valley, near Rutherford, is [Swanson Vineyard](#). Yes, it's the same Swanson family as the frozen food empire. Chris Phelps is the new winemaker, and he is building on the strong foundation created by previous winemaker Marco Capelli. This winery has a great attitude, and I enjoyed my visit. The *2002 Rosato* (\$18) possesses a delightful fruit salad of flavors, including wild strawberry, raspberry and bing cherry. The *2002 Pinot Grigio* (\$20) has a great nose of tropical fruits, with strong notes of citrus, pear and melon. This fruity but flinty wine would be well-matched with strong cheeses such as Gruyere. Their creamy and well-structured *2001 Chardonnay* (\$35) proved neither fat nor oaky, but very Burgundian. We then moved onto the reds, starting with a nicely balanced *2000 Merlot* (\$30), which has a blend of Syrah, Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon. Swanson is clearly proud of their *2001 Petit Syrah* (\$70), which is aged in American oak and is lovely on the palate. Next was the *1999 Sangiovese* (\$75) which has a strong color, a big nose, fruit forward with some cherry, and a long finish. Somewhat acidic, this bottle approaches an Italian Brunello. Finally, we wrapped up with the *2000 Alexis* (\$50), which is a blend consisting primarily of Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah. This elegant, smooth wine bursts with cocoa and chocolate. Overall, it is a dynamite bottle that is already opening nicely. Also, don't miss the *Angelica* (\$95), Swanson's fortified dessert-type wine that works aw well with spicy curries as with rich chocolate truffles.

Happy drinking in 2004!

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