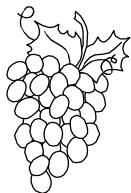


FROM THE GRAPEVINE

BY [JOEL M. FISHER](#)



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It's a typical good news/bad news situation. The good news is that Alexander Payne's hit "Sideways" is one of the best movies involving wine to ever hit the big screen. The bad news is that the mobs swarming the Santa Barbara tasting trails are making travel a challenge. (My guess is that the movie's popularity will boost the crowds in Paso Robles this May for the [Hospice de Rhone and Paso Robles Wine Festival](#).) Fortunately, with the help of [Firestone](#), [Curtis](#) and [Gainey](#), I was able to organize my quarterly winery visit with culinary students. We'll be heading up this month.

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[Southern Wine and Spirits](#) returned to Los Angeles recently with their "Best of the Best 2005" wine event. I always appreciate the opportunity to walk the halls and sample both familiar favorites and new discoveries.

I found the newer [Wattle Creek](#) wines to be of note. The 2003 *Sauvignon Blanc* demonstrated great color, obvious citrus aromas and flavor, and a crisp, clean finish. Their 2001 *Cabernet Sauvignon* had deep red colors, a nose of raspberry and currant, and some oak and chocolate overtones. This is an elegant young wine that could be enjoyed now.

[Brassfield Estate Vineyard](#), which is located in the High Valley area of California's coastal range, produced a light, fruity 2003 blend of Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Grigio and a splash of Gewurztraminer, labeled *Serenity*. This bottle showed honeysuckle, vanilla and peaches on the nose and crisp apples on the palate, culminating in an extended finish. I also enjoyed the 2002 *Brassfield Syrah, Lake County, High Valley*, with its plum and cherry aromas. This very nice wine had a soft tannic structure, with traces of vanilla oak on the finish. I recommend trying it if you find it.

Also of note were Steve Beckmen's (of [Beckmen Winery](#)) new Syrahs and Grenaches. His 2001 *Grenache* from Santa Ynez is a big wine, with floral aromas and lots of berry fruit. The softly tannic finish is long, with an interesting edge. Richer and spicier is the 2002 *Syrah*, which displays dark, peppery fruit.

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The [Family Winemakers of California](#) held their annual southern California conclave the day after the Southern show. More than 250 wineries participated, including some notable newcomers in surprising locations. [Handley Cellars](#) resides in Mendocino County, 15 miles from the coast. The winery enjoys both good sunshine and cool, foggy nights to produce about 14,000 cases per year. Its estate vineyard in Anderson Valley produces Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Pinot Gris, Gewürztraminer, Pinot Meunier and sparkling wines. Its Dry Creek vineyard in Sonoma produces top-rate Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc. is Co-owner Milla Handley, a graduate of UC Davis, is also Handley's winemaker.

Also up on the northern coast and not too far from Brassfield Estate is [Shannon Ridge](#). It released its first vintage last summer. This year's releases include a *2002 Zinfandel*, a *2002 Petit Syrah* and a *2002 Cabernet Sauvignon*, along with a *2003 Barbera* and a *2003 Sauvignon Blanc*.

The [Cooper-Garrod Winery](#) is located in Saratoga. Initially known for its equestrian center, the winery sprawls across 28 beautiful acres in the eastern Santa Cruz Mountains. The winery is open to visitors on the first Saturday of the month and weekday afternoons free of charge, but Cooper-Garrod asks that visitors call ahead. Their first wine is a 2000 *Cabernet Franc* which tastes like a not overly complicated French Chinon. Their robust yet smooth **1999 Cabernet Sauvignon** was aged for 22 months in French oak and shows a nice ruby color. The 1999 R.V.'s *Fine Claret* is a light Bordeaux-style blend of their Cabernet Franc and Sauvignon. This bottle has a soft elegance. Also produced are small lots of **2002 Viognier** and 2001 Syrah. Total production of the winery is 3,000 cases.

The last winery I want to mention is one of my favorites: [Galante Vineyards](#), of Carmel Valley. I visited two years ago and thoroughly enjoyed Jack Galante's range of wines. Of particular note is a soft, rich **2002 "Blackjack Pasture" Cabernet Sauvignon**. With chocolate and black currant caressing the palate, this bottle possesses an elegant finish. The **2001 "Red Rose Hill" Cabernet Sauvignon** had bright berry and cherry flavors, whereas the **2001 "Rancho Galante" Cabernet Sauvignon** had more oak and mild tannins. The **2001 Estate Merlot** provide to be a lively wine with berry and plum flavors. Last, but not least, is Galante's **2004 Estate Sauvignon Blanc**. Peach, pear and passion fruit make for a pleasant drink. It's well worth finding Jack's wines locally. You can also visit the winery up in Carmel Valley or its new tasting room in Carmel-by-the-Sea. Enjoy!

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As always, happy drinking! Remember, half the fun of wine comes from discovering what fits your palate, your mood and your budget!

Joel M. Fisher is the wine instructor for the culinary program of the [Art Institute of California-Los Angeles](#). He is also a partner in the Los Angeles wine education company WINEVINE&DINE, which conducts programs throughout Southern California.