

KOEPPEL ON WINE



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California Cabernets from '02 Part One

Last year about this time, I launched a three-part series about cabernet sauvignon-based wines from the splendid 2001 vintage.

Now it's the turn of 2002.

Variations in years don't signify in California as much as they do in Europe, where weather can be extreme. Rarely does California produce a year that's a complete wash-out, as 2002 is for the Southern Rhone Valley.

Annual variations do count for something in California, but you can have an entire decade, as in the 1990s, where every year is above average to excellent, with 1997 usually accorded dream-vintage status.

Weaker years like 1998, '99 and 2000 may have lower ratings, but great winemakers have a way of making great wines (or better than average wines) no matter what Mother Nature deals out, sometimes with the back of her hand. I tasted some clunkers from those years, but also some brilliant wines.

Vintage 2001 is justly celebrated as a classic for highly structured and expressive cabernet sauvignon in California (the best since '97), especially in Napa Valley and Sonoma County. Two-thousand-and-two produced slightly warmer, more approachable wines (look at the differences between the Flora Springs Trilogy '01 and '02 for a textbook example), but as you'll see from this page and the ones that follow (this survey will also be in three-parts), plenty of cabernets and cabernet-blends offers terrific structure and backbone.

This survey includes a few of the latest released wines from 2001.

Far Niente Cabernet Sauvignon 2002

Cabernet sauvignon 90%, cabernet franc 5%, merlot 3%, petit verdot 2%
Oakville District, Napa Valley, California
Excellent

Here's a real mouthful of wine that displays a huge ballast of gravity, I mean it feels bowl-shaped, or perhaps bell-shaped, it's certainly as resonant as a great bell. It's ripe, meaty and fleshy, very minerally, sleek and polished, sporting dense grainy tannins but with thorough balance and integration. The flavors are lovely, juicy and lush cassis, black cherry and black raspberry deeply set into that foundation of tannin, oak and mossy earth. **Great purity and intensity.** Try 2008 through 2010 or '12.

