

Cognoscenti magazine

Because life is short

Caymus Vineyards Rutherford, California

Napa Valley lies in California, of course—and the weekend, with Bay Area day trippers in BMWs speeding past \$5 million *faux chateaux* on the hilltops, leaves one in no doubt about it. But in a day and age when barons of Silicon Valley seek to become instant cult winemakers, Chuck Wagner is one of Napa Valley's delightful anachronisms.

Though a savvy businessman, Chuck seems essentially a farmer at heart—the simplicity of his manner and the practicality of his vision leave a guest in little doubt. (There's something tremendously refreshing about this, of course, since grapes are grown on farms, not in tasting rooms, salons or restaurants.)

The difference between Chuck and the average farmer is that the average farmer raises corn, wheat or oats, while Chuck's outsized family farm produces tens of thousands of cases annually of something that is—according to its marketplace valuation—closer to solid gold. That something? **Caymus** wine of course.

Chuck received visiting **Cognoscenti Magazine** editors in the estate's rustic tasting room. Here, thick walls are lined with black and white family photos

reaching back several generations, and you can feel the weight of tradition in the air—about as much as you're likely to encounter in California's *nouveau milieu*. But then, Chuck was born and raised here.

“Texture is tannin,” he told us. “Bordeaux are wines of texture, and California wines are wines of flavor. Here we have soft and sweet tannins.” Cask-tasting the **2004** Cabs with us, Chuck noted a “measured ripeness, a sweetness that is evidence of ripe fruit, almost towards raisin,” in addition to a characteristic berry/cherry complex. The **2003** is “classic, a compact wine full of stuffing, with so much to offer—and it delivers,” said Chuck. At this early point the 2003 would seem to lack quite the promise of either the 2004, or the 2002 (tasted in bottle).



Chuck Wagner drawing wine from cask

The 100% Cabernet Sauvignon **2002 Special Selection** is, as Chuck says, a “hedonistic” offering. With intense fruit flavors and silky tannins tucked into a brash, well-structured package, this promises to be special indeed. There is a kind of robustness here, even a certain ruggedness, yet nothing the least crude, rough, or unfocussed about it. The deep cherry cough syrup aspect is rather reminiscent of (shall we say it?) *Échézeaux*. **[Rating: 94-96]**

Chuck then poured two of the best Caymus vintages from the 1990s—the **1991** and **1994 Special Selec-**

tions. With age, darker notes of cocoa, coffee and cigar had appeared. The 1994 Special Selection is “a wine of spice and some vegetal background,” Chuck told us. We discovered it still inside its drinking window, unfolding in the glass to yield a spice-box and tobacco-barn bouquet along with powerful cherry notes. **[Rating: 94]** The 1991 Special Selection is “worth smelling and smelling again for its floral nose of truffle.” The wine—something of a survivor from an earlier style and era of winemaking—shows a still-vibrant strawberry/cranberry/cherry red flavor complex, and has a more veiled, complex, and elegant character than its 1994 sibling. **[Rating: 95]**

This article was written by Jeffrey Riggs, Senior Contributing Editor to *Cognoscenti Magazine*.

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