



CELEBRATING RESTRAINT IN CALIFORNIA

Winemakers are finally dialing down ripeness and dialing up freshness.

I love ripe flavors and full body in wine, and winemakers in the California regions I cover have no problem coaxing these qualities out of their grapes. But I also love complexity, texture, acidity and surprise. Luckily, in 2015, a growing number of winemakers showed that they do, too.

I'm not going to write a diatribe against high-alcohol, extremely ripe and overtly oaky wines.

I think people should drink what they like. I do know these wines quite well, however, since my tasting beats include some of California's jammiest red blends, high-octane Zinfandels and plump Chardonnays.

I know them so well that I sometimes get tired of them. (I also love slow-cooked pork shoulder, but it's too rich to eat often, so the leftovers tend to congeal in the fridge.) That's why the appearance of dozens of new, lean, fresh and vibrant wines is a great thing.

Sauvignon Blanc from high-altitude Lake County, Pinot Noir from coastal Anderson Valley and Albariño from Clarksburg in the Sacramento River Delta region are a few examples of wine-making restraint that are making cocktail hour and dinnertime more refreshing at my house.

Lower alcohol content—around 13% or below—is a common thread in these wines, but it's often not evident until you check the fine print on the label. More prominent acidity is what triggers a happy dance by my taste buds, along with a set of flavors that seem to come from a different stall in the farmer's market.

Sauvignon Blanc smells like citrus or even celery, rather than honeydew melon. Pinot Noir puts out red cherry—even sour cherry—instead of black cherry. But beyond the change in descriptors is a sense of tension that James Joyce described as “electricity” when he tasted it in white wine.

So while “restraint” usually sounds like a negative term, as in restraining orders, financial restraints and so on, that's not always the case with wine. Picking the grapes a week or two earlier than the neighboring vineyard, when the acidity is higher and the sugar slightly lower, is a good thing for certain wines and certain occasions. Fermenting and aging the wine in steel or concrete tanks or well broken-in barrels, rather than new barrels, can be a good change, too.

That some winemakers choose to exercise a little restraint makes California wine more diverse than its reputation, and amps up the voltage in your glass. 🍷

RESTRAINED IN PRICE, TOO

Sidebar 2014 Sauvignon Blanc (High Valley); \$22
David Ramey's new white from Lake County is lean and energized.

Dancing Coyote 2013 Albariño (Clarksburg); \$12
Tangy apple and peach-skin flavors are in search of grilled lemon-garlic oysters.

Twisted 2013 Cabernet Sauvignon (California); \$8
It's difficult not to guzzle this light, bistro-style, raspberry-scented Cab.

Scott Harvey 2012 Mountain Selection Zinfandel (Amador County); \$24
Cranberry flavors, firm acidity and tannins bring restraint in spite of 14.5% alcohol.

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A contributing editor for *Wine Enthusiast* since early 2014 and a wine journalist for decades, Jim Gordon has been surprising himself lately by liking tense, nervy wines, especially as apéritifs.

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