

Wine Spectator

I tasted thousands of wines in 2012, and you already know which wines we selected for the Wine Winemakers Who Made a Difference in California

TEN GOLDEN STATE WINEMAKERS WHO STEPPED UP THEIR GAME IN 2012

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Spectator Top 100 Wines of 2012. Today I want to recognize some of the California winemakers who stepped up their game in 2012, either with their own wines or in their consulting projects. You will see some familiar names as well as some you probably don't yet know, but all are making outstanding if not classic-rated wines.

Jeff Ames has overseen winemaking for his label, Ruidius, along with making wines for Tor, Knights Bridge and others. For Tor alone, he had an extraordinary year, with four outstanding 2009 Cabernets (three scoring 95 points or more), three outstanding 2010 Chardonnays (one scoring 95) and a 95-point 2010 Syrah.

Russell Bevan is settling into a groove with some high-water marks with Napa Cabernet.

Eric Jensen of Booker in Paso Robles proved the value of fantastic, fanatic farming with stellar wines. Jensen makes a variety of fascinating, exceptional-quality cuvées, mostly from Rhône grapes Syrah, Grenache, Counoise and Mourvèdre, along with Cabernet, Tempranillo and others. Jensen's wines rival those of his West Paso neighbor, Justin Smith at Saxum.

Annie Favia and Andy Erickson (formerly of Screaming Eagle, still with Dancing Hares) are perhaps the most talented, least-known wife-and-husband winemaking team in California. Everything they touch is exceptional as Amador County is coming of age with wines that rival the best in the state. One key is the winemaker, or in one case, the winemaking team (See Keplinger and Pruett below). The Favia Amador reds (Rompecabezas, The Lincoln and Quarzo) have been stellar now for years, hovering in the 95-point atmosphere. The Napa couple's Napa La Magdalena Cabernet Franc-based blend fits snugly among Napa's finest.

Kenneth Juhasz, owner-winemaker of Auteur in Sonoma, has been making wine for a decade. He began his career with Pinot Noir in Oregon, using Burgundy as a model, yet he's found a happy home in Sonoma, where he has raised the quality bar by making his Pinot Noirs in a riper, fuller, more flavorful style. In particular, Auteur's Mendocino Ridge Manchester Ridge Vineyard 2009 (94, \$50), Sonoma Coast 2009 (93, \$38) and Sonoma Coast Stage Vineyard (93, \$60) are the best California wines he's made. His work with the 2009 vintage at Donum (six outstanding Pinots) added to his remarkable year.

Helen Keplinger is proving her talents as a winemaker, making a trio of striking Rhône-inspired Sierra Foothills reds under her Keplinger label—Sumo (Petite Sirah, Syrah and Viognier) and Lithic (Grenache, Syrah and Mourvèdre) from Amador, and Caldera (Mourvèdre, Grenache and Counoise) from El Dorado. Ann Kraemer's Shake Ridge Vineyards is at the epicenter of the Keplinger excitement.

Aaron Pott of Pott winery is getting his due, having made three outstanding 2009 Napa Cabernets.

Like Mark Carter, race-car driver Scott Pruett was encouraged to pursue wine by Fred Schrader, and he has accelerated with outstanding reds from the Sierra Foothills.

Mike Smith, who trained with Thomas Brown, took over winemaking at Carter Cellars, where the reds have always been outstanding, coming from exceptional sites. But in 2009, Carter had three 95-point ratings (and a total of five outstanding reds), the result of Smith being able to capitalize on a sensational vintage and give the wines a little more polish and finesse. Smith's own label, Myriad, is a rising star, too.

Joey Wagner, the son of Caymus owner Chuck Wagner, is pursuing Pinot Noir under the Belle Glos/Meiomi label from a variety of vineyards and appellations throughout the state, seeking, like his father, the art of the blend.

That's my starter's list. Chime in in the comments with other winemakers or vintners who stood out in your wine life this past year.