

STIRRING THE LEES WITH JAMES MOLESWORTH

## 2018 Napa Cabernets Shine at Accendo, J.H. Wheeler and Trois Noix

Napa Valley veteran Bart Araujo and family are building an admirable track record with a trio of young wine labels



Wheeler Farms is home base for the Araujo family's lineup of Napa Cabernet labels, including Accendo, J.H. Wheeler and Trois Noix. (Adrien Gregorutti)

By James Molesworth

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Napa's Araujo clan is now based out of their Wheeler Farms facility on Zinfandel Lane in St. Helena, which they bought not long after selling their namesake estate. For more background on Bart and Daphne Araujo and their children Jaime and Greg, cycle back through my Winery Intel reports on both Accendo and Araujo Estate (the latter, along with Eisele Vineyard, was sold to Artémis Domaines in 2013).

Jaime has a fledgling project, Trois Noix, "Born in 2013 out of a lot that was for Accendo originally, but it wouldn't play well with others," she says. "It was a Coombsville Cabernet, about 300 cases worth, and it just wouldn't work in the [Accendo] blend. So we bought it out from Accendo and bottled it on its own."

Until recently, Meghan Zobeck was the winemaker here, but she left to take on the job of rebuilding Burgess Cellars. Enter winemaker Trevor Smith, who has worked at Screaming Eagle and Antica Terra.

Trois Noix is in growth mode, but moderated. The 2018 production was 800 cases, which includes Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc in addition to Cabernet blends. For the Cabernet blends, all the fruit is grapes that didn't make the cut for Accendo, but there will be no 2019 Trois Noix red here, as Accendo took everything. To hedge against that uncommon occurrence, Jaime was able to pick up some steady grape sources starting in 2020, a vintage when many producers bailed on grape contracts due to concerns over smoke taint

and the economic headwinds of COVID. Additional sources signed in 2021 will allow Jaime to grow the brand to 2,000 cases, with a near-term max target of 5,000 cases.

The **2018 Trois Noix Napa Valley Noisette Cuvée** (56 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 36 percent Cabernet Franc and 8 percent Petit Verdot) is plush and inviting with a wave of warm cassis flecked with light savory and floral notes. It has some solid tannins but they're well-embedded, and there's a nice tug of clay through the finish. It retails for \$100.

Also of note is the **2018 Trois Noix Cabernet Franc Napa Valley** (\$150). It's a really solid, varietally correct offering, with a broad beam of cassis and warmed plum notes laced with lots of tobacco and freshly plowed earth. It's grippy and well-assembled, with a mineral edge peeking in at the end.

"Cabernet Franc is where Sauvignon Blanc was 10 years ago," says Jaime. "People are starting to say, 'Hey, this can make some really good stuff,' even though it's been here for quite a while. It just hasn't been a respected standalone grape until recently."

The Araujo family flagship is Accendo which, since its debut in 2013, has quietly set a very enviable track record: Its three most recently released vintages, 2015 through 2017, have all earned classic ratings of 95 points or better on Wine Spectator's 100-point scale.

Winemaker Nigel Kinsman fashions the fruit, sourced from a small cadre of Oakville vineyards. In 2018, the blend and sourcing changed a little bit, however, because the vintage provided a qualitative bounty of choices.

The blend is just 85 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, along with 11 percent Cab Franc and 4 percent Petit Verdot. The majority of fruit comes, as usual, from Vine Hill Ranch in Oakville and Sleeping Lady Vineyard in Yountville. But the Cabernet Franc is sourced from Diamond Mountain and the Petit Verdot from the former Abreu-farmed Thorevilos vineyard (now owned by Jack Bittner of Ovid).

"It's rare for us to have a wine that's less than 90 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, but the Franc in '18 was just amazing," says Bart.

"It really handles the heat better, and that's why you're seeing it more in the valley, both as standalone and in blends," adds Kinsman.

There are just fewer than 1,000 cases of the **2018 Accendo Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley** (\$360). Production could be up to 2,000 cases based on the fruit sourcing, but the selection here is always stringent. The wine shows its typically lush and alluring mouthfeel, with waves of pure, unadulterated cassis, plum and blackberry fruit that just won't quit. While persistent, the fruit does cede some ground though, allowing subtle alder, sage and licorice notes to slide in on the finish. It's a remarkably fine-grained wine that delivers a seductive late echo of warm loam. It's just a bit youthfully tight now unlike the more opulent '16 and flattering '17 wines were right away. And there's nothing wrong with that. This is another classic in the making (and set for an October 2021 release).

There is now a second wine here as well, though it's not strictly just from fruit culled out of the Accendo final blend. Instead, the blending for Accendo is done, and with the remaining lots, some may be included in the new Laurea bottling. The **2018 Laurea** (\$125, 645 cases made) is 95 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 4 percent Cabernet Franc and 1 percent Petit Verdot. It delivers lots of pure, charming cassis and cherry puree flavors, with a similarly seductive mouthfeel as the grand vin. But this is brighter, fresher and more approachable now in style. It's not shy with its fruit, but there's depth here, with a long anise and graphite edge on the finish. It's really lovely stuff.

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Looking ahead, the Araujos will not be releasing a 2020, a decision more than a handful of top Cabernet producers have made due to the threat of smoke taint in the wines from the late-season wildfires.

"We vinified some fruit to see what it was like," says Bart. "The analysis said no [smoke taint]. But either way, we just didn't feel right and so we wound up leaving most of it on the vine."

There is also a separate line of wines produced here under the J.H. Wheeler label. The label has been around for a few vintages but it's getting a total reboot for 2018, from fruit sourcing to the label itself.

"The Wheeler reboot was essentially for two reasons," says Kinsman. "We moved to a single-vineyard lineup, whereas previously we'd created multi-AVA blends. And with the move to single-vineyard wines, we also decided to take ourselves much more seriously than we previously did, really push ourselves to craft wines with intent, and what we feel are better expressions and more compelling wines. There is the potential to add other single-vineyard wines as the sites we work with continue to show their true colors, develop some more age and we begin to understand them better."

The new single-vineyard bottlings include a pair of Beckstoffer parcels, The Georges III and Missouri Hopper spots. 2019 will see a Vine Hill Ranch bottling added.

"J.H. Wheeler was not originally part of the business plan here. But as we got going, we realized we had relationships with growers, a great facility and the hospitality side of the business, so it just started to grow," says Bart.

The **J.H. Wheeler Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Beckstoffer Missouri Hopper 2018** is a pure Cabernet Sauvignon bottling (\$225, 300 cases made) that has the ripe, energetic profile of the vintage, with bold cassis and plum reduction notes that have great focus and drive. There are nice sweet tobacco and red licorice notes that fill in with great length on the finish.

The **J.H. Wheeler Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Beckstoffer Georges III Vineyard 2018** (\$225) is another pure Cab that is even more expressive, with a great wave of dark cassis and blackberry puree flavors. It has a sheen of toast but soaks it up easily as it moves through the finish, where black licorice and apple wood notes strut their stuff alongside the fruit. This is a gutsier feel than the sleeker Missouri Hopper.

The **2018 J.H. Wheeler Napa Valley Cuvée 1880** (\$175) blends Missouri Hopper and Georges III fruit, and the blend of 80 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 10 percent Cabernet Franc and 10 percent Merlot is meant to showcase a different side of Cabernet via its typical blending grapes. It's more open in feel, with a mix of dark plum and blackberry fruit and expressive anise, black tea and apple wood notes. There's a late tug of earth, but this is primarily fruit and provides more accessibility now than the two single-vineyard bottlings.

Rounding out the lineup is the **J.H. Wheeler Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2018** (100 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, \$125) sourced primarily from the Red Hen vineyard in Oak Knoll District. It too is very expressive today, with a gorgeous beam of cassis and cherry puree laced with anise and black tea. The graphite-edged finish is sleek and fresh. It's a textbook Napa Cab that is both approachable now but should develop well over the next 10 years.

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