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USA, California, Napa Valley: Chappellet – A Complete 50-Year Retrospective

LISA PERROTTI-BROWN

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Vintage	Wines	RP
1969	Chappellet Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon	100
2012	Chappellet Cabernet Sauvignon Pritchard Hill	100
2013	Chappellet Cabernet Sauvignon Pritchard Hill	99
2014	Chappellet Cabernet Sauvignon Pritchard Hill	99
2016	Chappellet Cabernet Sauvignon Pritchard Hill	(97 - 100)

There is almost certainly nothing in the world that so honestly and evocatively records the history of a time, place and custodian/crafter like wine. Having the opportunity to taste the entire vinous history to date of a single-vineyard wine produced by the same family is an experience that surely borders on the spiritual. To celebrate the winery's 50th anniversary, the Chappellet family generously offered such an experience as a collection of charity auction lots for Auction Napa Valley for five couples (ten people in total). When the time came for the recipients of those lots to participate in the tasting, they very generously invited me to document this incredible occasion, which I hasten to add, by nature of the experience, somewhat defies words let alone numbers.

The story behind the now iconic Chappellet wine label is one of a tight-knit family of artists, visionaries and dreamers. Donn and Molly Chappellet followed Donn's dream of making wine by checking out of Los Angeles corporate life and heading north to California wine country with their young family. Andre Tchelistcheff—a founding father of modern Napa Valley Cabernet—mentored Donn. Donn was looking for a location where he could produce a "European" style of Cabernet Sauvignon. It was Tchelistcheff who inspired him to search for land beyond the already busy valley floor and look to the hills, at a time when those in the hills were considered to be, well, hillbillies. In 1966, the sheer beauty of 320 acres of land on Pritchard Hill captured the hearts of Donn, Molly and their children. It was, appropriately, the

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Summer of Love—1967—that they moved lock, stock and barrel to this remote location and founded Chappellet.



Chappellet's pyramid-shaped winery

The first vintage from the precocious young vines of the first plantings was 1968. In pursuit of a more "European" style, it seems rather fitting that a young Englishman, Philip Togni, was Chappellet's first winemaker. Togni was the one winemaker in Chappellet's history thus far who was unable to make it to this tasting. The Chappellet family's present and Togni's contemporary winemakers described his style of winemaking as one that is built for the ages. By all accounts, the wines were so firm and structured in their youth with the fruit tightly wound and bound that they verged on austerity, unable to reveal their true potential for a couple of decades. In 1968, the first official 600 cases were produced and sold at a release price of \$8.50. I was incredibly impressed with how this inaugural vintage was showing now, 50 years on. Beautifully perfumed and satiny smooth, it had none of the hard edges purported in its youth. Just one year later, the 1969 vintage produced a wine that not only would exist even today as one of the greatest Napa Cabernet Sauvignons ever made, but it firmly put the Chappellet family vineyard on the global wine map. Just 400 cases were made in that classic Togni structured style; however, what makes this an extraordinary vintage is that the wine also possesses layer upon layer of ripe, rich, generous fruit. What was it about the 1969 from Chappellet that elevated it to stand heads and shoulders above other Napa Valley wines from that, generally considered, rather ordinary vintage? Apart from the fact that sometimes vineyards provide some of their best fruit in the first few years, the greatness of this wine shows how different a vintage can be up in the hills/mountains above Napa than down on the valley floor.



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Philip Togni remained Chappellet's winemaker until 1975, when Joe Cafaro took over. In 1978 Tony Soter took over as winemaker, and then in 1979 Cathy Corison came on board to make the wines until 1986, when current winemaker Phillip Corallo-Titus took over. 1989 can be considered a transition year to start shifting to a flagship wine—the "Signature" label. Only 1,100 cases were made in this transition year. This is also when the Chappellets made the difficult and expensive decision to replant due to virus and problems in some blocks with the AXR1 rootstock (infamous for not being as resistant to phylloxera as it should have been). For a few years, they sold off part of the deselected wine in bulk, and then they started to make the "Mountain Cuvee." Since 1992, there is a Signature and a Pritchard Hill Estate label, and from 1997, the Pritchard Hill Estate Vineyard became the flagship.

Donn Chappellet passed away in 2016, unquestionably leaving behind an incredible legacy in the realization of his dream and the creation of a new and profound face of Napa Valley Cabernet. Perhaps less well known in wine circles is his wife Molly. To meet her is to immediately understand how none of this could have happened without her. A strong-minded, very talented artist, author and landscaper in her own right, it was Molly who conceived of Chappellet's visually striking Pyramid winery—based on the architectural creation she most admires. This is also the image behind the label's logo. Her creative flare for revealing the latent beauty in nature is visible throughout the winery and homestead, particularly the living art that is her home garden. What's more, the art and dreams of Molly and Donn are clearly reborn in the free-thinking spirits of their children, who continue to enhance and build upon the work that their parents started.

Within the notes attached to this article, I have done my utmost to capture the aromas/flavors, styles, personalities and state of maturity of each of the 50 wines tasted over two days. What was more difficult, if not impossible, to describe was the emotional landscape that the 50 wines, as a collection, paint. Can you smell and taste aspects of people's lives as they play out on a special piece of land: aromatic compositions that act like snapshots of adventure, hope, devotion, victories, disappointments, occasional heartache and overwhelming joy? While I'm aware that our wine science community would frown at the implausibility of such a suggestion, having had the great opportunity to participate in tastings such as this memorable occasion with the Chappellets a few times in my life, I'm not so sure this is just fanciful thinking.

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