

2003 Mason Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc (\$16) – Pretty floral nose with bright citrus, grass, herb and vanilla notes. Soft and lush, with a rich core of orange, lemon, apricot and kiwifruit and a lively finish.

NAPA VALLEY CAMP



Napa Wine Company, a custom crush facility in Napa Valley's Oakville district, is home to Mason Cellars. There, Randy Mason crafts his 23,000 cases of wine, which include 18,000 Sauvignon Blanc. He credits his success to a hot Sauvignon Blanc market and the fact that his tastes good – seems simple. “We’ve been able to penetrate a huge number of restaurant wine-by-the-glass programs,” Mason noted. “The wine was priced right and we knew that if we could get people to taste it, reorders would be spectacular. That’s why the label went from 1,400 cases to 18,000 cases in four years.”

Mason offered his explanation of the flavor spectrum of various Sauvignon Blanc styles: “Fruit-driven ones incorporate no oak and highlight relatively green fruit. Whether one likes it or not, it showcases the varietal. At the other end of the spectrum are those wines picked at 23.5 degrees to 25 degrees Brix and barrel fermented to be a Chardonnay look-alike. Those wines are truly disjointed and have no redeeming value.” Sauvignon Blanc has some inherent problems on the back palate and the finish, Mason believes. They can be too metallic. “I want my wine to be varietally true,” he admitted, “yet if the wine is true in the nose, meaning herbaceous, it passes through to the taste and a whole bunch of people don’t like such an aggressive style.”

GETTING IT CORRECT

The key to the popularity of Mason Sauvignon Blanc is that it finishes well. This is achieved by partially barrel fermenting juice. Seeking enhanced texture and roundness, Mason experimented with barrel fermentation and aging in seasoned puncheons. Overall, his wine-making method has evolved. Today, he purchases fruit from Yountmill Vineyard and this source is the reason Mason was able to significantly increase production and maintain the same

flavor profile. Yountmill Vineyards grows 600 tons of Sauvignon Blanc and Mason buys 260 tons.

Viticultural improvements were made in the vineyard, so Mason decided to barrel ferment and age the wine four months on the *lees*. Then, he made blends containing ten, 15, 20, 25, 30 and up to 40 samples to eight of his distributors and asked them to share the wines and send him a reaction. “The result,” Mason detailed, “was that everybody preferred the blend with 15 percent barrel-fermented juice. At ten percent, the wine was too lean and at 20 percent, the oak showed through and I didn’t want that.” The bottom line today is that Mason Sauvignon Blanc is 85 percent stainless steel fermented with 15 percent fermented in new French and American oak, and then aged in the *lees* for four months. The other nuance is that the tank fermented portion undergoes a 35-day cold fermentation at 42 to 44 degrees Fahrenheit. Mason describes it as “pushing the envelope.”

Cold fermentation amplifies the fruit tremendously. Mason advises other winemakers to pick greener than they would ordinarily. In the vineyard, Mason also shades one side of the vine row differently than the other to give a variety of ripeness levels. The sugar difference between green and golden berries is minimal, but the flavor difference is huge. The ratio of golden to green fruit is about 60/40, creating a wine that is not too herbaceous, but unmistakable in variety. The golden fruit ferments out to give concentrated grapefruit characters. Thus, the Mason style is grapefruit-citrus with a substantial finish. From a winemaking point of view, Mason works strictly on texture. He wants the wine to feel good in the mouth from beginning to end. “This is not about flavor,” Mason stressed, “it’s about mouthfeel. If I can get the right mouthfeel, everything else will be there.” Mason never adds Semillon to the blend. “Years ago,” he admitted, “I did blending trials with Semillon and I couldn’t stand one of them, even as low as ten percent.

Mason likes oysters and clam fettuccini with his Sauvignon Blanc. Spicy Thai food works well and the acid in the wine cuts through the sauce. “I like Sauvignon Blanc because it tastes good—as simple as that. It’s fun. As a winemaker, the challenge is to extract all the flavor the grape will give. My job is to preserve the flavor, rather than using cellar techniques to create them. When Sauvignon Blanc is made clean, it goes with every style food and it’s just a nice wine to drink.