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Mason Cellars is the Place to Go for Sauvignon Blanc

By Sasha Paulsen, *Napa Valley Register*

Say Sauvignon Blanc and many think of the great Pouilly-Fumes and Sancerres from Loire Valley in France or maybe the strikingly different New Zealand whites.

As for the California, well, here's what wine scribe James Laube had to say in the *Wine Spectator's* "California Wines": "Sauvignon Blanc comes in second behind chardonnay in terms of quality and popularity....Many winemakers treat it like chardonnay, employing barrel fermentation and sur lie aging and malolactic fermentation. The result is a sort of poor man's chardonnay."

This, however, is changing with the emergence of first-rate Sauvignon Blancs that are fresh, crisp and sleek, a refreshing change from the chardonnay.

And one winemaker in the Napa Valley has been building a glowing reputation on this grape.

"We want to be **the** Sauvignon Blanc house," said winemaker Randy Mason, of Mason Cellars, which opened a tasting room in Napa at the end of November.

Mason, who has been making wine since 1972, said he fell in love with Sauvignon Blanc in the 1980s when he was winemaker and general manager at Lakespring Winery in Yountville. "I felt like winemakers have inflicted winemaking on chardonnay; as a winemaker it's more fun to deal with Sauvignon Blanc," he said recently at his new tasting room. "The grape has a lot to give – there's a lot more to be got (from it)."

Mason's three Sauvignon Blancs – the 2004 Sauvignon Blanc, the 2005 Pomelo and the new Reserve 2005 Sauvignon Blanc – are available for tasting – for free in December – at the new digs on First Street, along with a 2001 cabernet Sauvignon and a 2001 merlot.

Mason, originally from San Rafael, headed to UC Davis with the intention of becoming a vet, but he added fermentation studies to his courses on animal science, and after graduating, he went to work for Chappellet Vineyards in Napa where he stayed for six years. From there he helped the Battat family launch

Lakespring winery at what is now the site of Havens. For the next 16 years, Mason was winemaker and general manager of Lakespring, until it was sold, and he decided to go out on his own.

In 1993 he founded Mason Cellars in Oakville and also helped create Napa Wine Company, a custom crush winery in Oakville, where he makes his wines. His first was a merlot, but in 1996 he released his first Sauvignon Blanc and the accolades started to roll in as both Wine & Food and Wine Spectator praised his affordable, appealing wines. This year, Mason produced 60,000 cases, most of it Pomelo, a delicious, “grapefruity wine that retails for \$10 a bottle.

This year, Mason and his wife, Megan, decided to open a Napa tasting room. “We were feeling like we wanted to have our own home,” Megan Mason said. Megan, who hails from the Peninsula, studied communications at UC Berkeley before moving to Napa, where she worked for Meadowood. She and Randy met as neighbors living in Yountville.

Megan is the “front of the house” in the new enterprise on First Street and she oversaw the design of the tasting room, which deviates from the standard, dark and sophisticated tasting room. This welcoming yellow, green and white room has the feel of a country kitchen. “We wanted something light, airy and fresh, like our wines,” she said. A further family touch – and one you rarely find in a tasting room – is added by a display of knitted handbags and scarves for sale that were created by the Masons’ daughter, Olivia, a student at Stone Bridge School in Napa. Randy’s two daughters, Rebecca and Ashley, both in their 20’s, are also joining the family business, he said.

The focus of the room, however, remains the wines, especially the Sauvignon Blancs. “For me it’s the right grape,” he said. The Mason Cellars tasting room at 714 First Street, Napa, is open Thursday through Monday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Mason wines are also available for tasting at the Napa Wine Company, 7830-400 St. Helena Highway, Oakville.