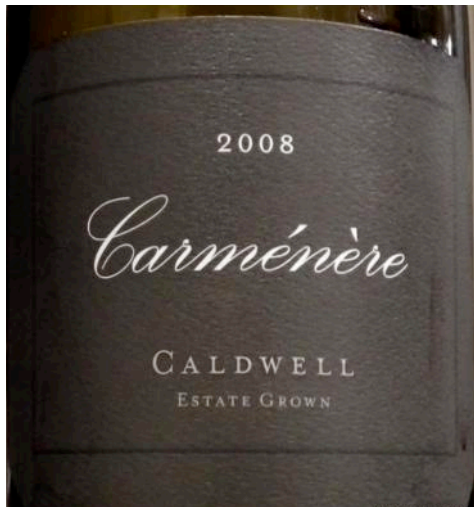


## Drinking Outside The Box

Wine for people who have a life

### It's Carmenère, but it's not from Chile...

Just getting to the end of a fascinating week in Napa Valley. Was at Bond winery last night for a superb farewell meal prepared by team from the now-3-starred restaurant at Meadowood Resort with accompanying wines from Schramsberg, Clos du Val, Silver Oak, Rubicon and of course Bond. After our pudding plates had been enthusiastically scraped clean, Estate Director Paul Roberts MS asked us a question – what had been our highs and lows of the week? Some of the lows were expected – alcohol levels, price, over-extraction – while a few of the highs, mostly from the purple lips of Oz Clarke, were unprintable, but involved references to various ladies he'd encountered.



My high and low were related. The low was that in a region that, as had been hammered into us several times through the week, has widely differing soils, temperatures, rainfall, aspects etc – various terroirs in other words – there was such a focus on one grape variety, namely Cabernet Sauvignon. There is some terrific Cabernet produced here, usually from vineyards with slopes and well-drained soils, but there is also rather a lot of ho-hum, me-too wine. And just as in other parts of the wine world, these hang on the coat-tails of the top wines and command prices that just have you shaking your head in bemusement.

My high was that despite this dominance of Cabernet, it's still possible to find other grapes strutting their stuff. For those who've dismissed it in the past, Napa Sauvignon is worth re-examining, while for anyone who can find it, the Syrah can also be excellent – why aren't Americans drinking more of it? Most people here seem to keep quiet about Pinot Noir, but it can be excellent (the delicious wines of Ancien were new me), as can the Chardonnay. Then there have been examples of Riesling, Grüner Veltliner, Nero d'Avola, Petite Sirah, Flora, Chenin Blanc, Roussanne, Albariño, Grignolino, Charbono, Carignan, Tempranillo and

Aglianico – not all were great, but they showed that was still life beyond Cabernet. And in the Bordeaux family of grapes, Cabernet Franc has been a highlight (Paradigm is a star), while Petit Verdot (intriguing if slightly stolid) and Malbec (more wildness, freshness and fragrance) are also gaining traction. But I also came across this Carmenère from Caldwell Vineyard. I'm not quite sure whether its \$95 price tag makes it the world's most expensive Carmenère, and I wish (as with many Napa wines) that the winemaker had been a little lighter-handed with the oak. However, its smoky, herby intensity and flavours of dark plummy black fruit tinged with chocolate show that it could have a future in the warmer parts of the valley – watch out Chile...