

HARLAN ESTATE

THE VINTAGES

The following notes, compiled by winemaker Bob Levy, are written to be insightful rather than exhaustive. Lifted from field and cellar records, as well as journals and recent tasting notes, they seek to provide a thumbnail sense of the growing season, a general description of the wines in their current state, and a guide to future drinkability.

Many of the notes come from a tasting, recently staged at the winery, of all vintages produced by Harlan Estate since our founding.

With the founding of Harlan Estate in 1984, we embarked upon our mission of creating a “first growth” of California. The estate’s early vineyard development began with just six acres. Today our planting is essentially complete, with nearly forty acres under vine to the classic varietals: cabernet sauvignon (70%), merlot (20%), cabernet franc (8%), and petit verdot (2%). Invariably, the finished wine is predominately cabernet sauvignon, which we blend with varying amounts of the other three varietals as we seek to express faithfully the unique and distinctive character of the site.

Modest quantities of wine were produced in 1987, 1988, and 1989 from grapes that represented the second, third, and fourth leaf of our estate vineyard. In each of those years a small number of barrels were produced in the hope of gaining a prescient glimpse into what the character of the land—never before cultivated—might have to offer. The wines were blended, bottled, and labeled with a special designation. Though charming in their own way, these first wines fell short of our standards and aspirations, so were never released. They continue to serve as humble reminders of where we began the journey.

1987

SECOND LEAF A very good vintage overall in the Napa Valley. A mild drought year, with a drier-than-normal winter, followed by a cool spring and mid-May bloom. Heat spikes in June and July punctuated the summer. *Véraison* was complete by July 27. Two rare thunderstorms in August and September only added to the excitement of an early harvest, yielding a very small crop gleaned from our first six bearing acres.

Medium-red color, turning slightly brick at edge. Subtle aromatics of graphite and mint with savory notes of sage. Although somewhat lean at entry, the impression in the mouth and mid-palate is nicely developed with intriguing flavors of sour cherry and damson plums, showing good length and minerality at the finish. Overall, our inaugural effort remains interesting, and a window to the qualities of our site, yet to come.

1988

THIRD LEAF In 1998, we had flowering in mid-May, with *véraison* complete by August 4. Moderate, fairly even temperatures marked the summer months. Harvest was early, fast, and fairly easygoing.

The wine is medium ruby in color, with some faint mahogany at the rim. The exotic nose, while slightly muted at this time, shows some lovely spice, plummy notes, and a hint of tomato leaf. The impression is reminiscent of a fine, mature Brunello: firm acidity and good balance, but lacking lushness. In retrospect, its complexity gave us another reason for encouragement.

1989

FOURTH LEAF A cooler vintage for Napa Valley. Flowering in late May, *véraison* mid-August. Our site enjoyed moderate, even summer temperatures. Harvest commenced September 5 and finished a mere 20 days later, drawn from just 24 producing acres. The blend that went to bottle was predominantly merlot.

A wine of medium-garnet color, with floral notes, tending to herbs and minerals. In the mouth it's red currant, cherry compote, and spicy sage. Strikingly harmonious and fairly complex. Tannins finish on the mid-palate with a moderate density. This wine delivers a lot of flavor interest and will likely continue to become increasingly complex for the next several years. Shows promise.

1990

FIRST RELEASE

In 1990 we received about half the normal amount of rainfall and recorded well-below-average winter temperatures. The cool weather continued into mid-March, delaying budbreak until the middle of April. On several days in early May temperatures rose to between 80°–100°, the rest of the month cooled considerably, leading to a bloom starting in the last week of May when temperatures hovered around 70°. Summer weather was mostly even and moderate, with a few bursts of heat in June, July, and August. A compact harvest began on August 31 with the young-vine merlot and was completed by September 17. Yields were skimpy, averaging just 1.6 tons per acre.

TASTING NOTES

Color good, some terra cotta at the edge. Delicate, suave notes of cedar, tobacco, Baker's chocolate, and cherry in an elegant profile. The entry is silky and the texture fine-grained and velvety. Lots of detail, showing black fruits, violet, mocha, stretched over sweet, refined tannins that linger and resolve into a long and supple finish.

A pretty wine, really showing its *terroir*, drinking very elegantly now and for the next dozen years.

1991

The winter rainfall was slightly below average and came late, mostly in March. Budbreak began on April 7, with flowering on May 23. Temperatures through the end of July rarely broke 80°, apart from one short spike of 100°+ in early July. August and September brought continued, even heat, with several days topping 90°. Harvest began on September 23 and finished on October 18. The yields across all blocks averaged 2.1 tons per acre.

TASTING NOTES

Good, deep color. A complex, slightly earthy, sweet mineral nose reminiscent of wild brush and undergrowth, glazed fruit, cedar, toasty vanilla, and ripe black currants. With aeration the aromatics grow significantly more multi-faceted, with distinct notes of celery and green olive. Although still outsized in the mouth, it shows remarkable balance with plenty of sweet ripe fruit, enhanced by layers of green and black olives. The finish lingers on with smooth and noticeably ripe tannins.

The 1991 has been tightly wound and slow to evolve for much of its life, yet this powerful vintage continues to develop slowly and gain in charm. Hold another 5 years, then drink for 15+ years.

1992

An average amount of rainfall (29 inches), much of it coming in February and March. An unusually early mid-March budbreak, and a May 16 bloom. Low- to mid-90° temperatures through July and August, with a few days reaching over 100°. Harvest began on August 25. In spite of sub-80° temperatures during the second week of September, the last pick took place on September 17. The average yield was about 2.2 tons per acre.

TASTING NOTES

Deep, garnet-red color. A sweet nose of red fruits, toast, spice, and intriguing earth tones. Sweet on the palate, still quite opulent and rich with full body, well-integrated tannins and lingering flavors of earth, minerals, and mint. Seamless.

Accessible and elegant, this wine still shows real youthfulness and potential to improve. Aromatically, it is somewhat reminiscent of Bordeaux. Drinking very nicely now, it should continue to develop and show well for another 10-15 years.

1993

Abundant winter rainfall (45+ inches) tapered to small amounts through budbreak on March 31, and into April and May. June and July temperatures ranged between 85°-90°. Intermittent hot days in August and September resulted in several selective harvests, beginning August 28 and ending October 2, rather than one extended crush. Yields were puny, averaging around 1.6 tons per acre.

TASTING NOTES

Dense, ruby core to garnet at edge. Ripe black fruit aromas, dusted with truffle, earth, and forest floor. With further airing, this wine reveals a more dried-herb profile, with notes of chocolate, toast, mineral, and black currant. Dense, full-bodied, and rich, it has a chewy texture balanced with ripe tannins, and a soft finish.

Still quite powerful and complex, displaying considerable freshness. Appealing now, but I advise laying it down for 4-5 years, then enjoy for many more (10+).

1994

Average winter rainfall, cool daytime temperatures with evening and early morning marine fog. Light showers lingered into late May, and spring temperatures were moderate. Budbreak began the second week of April, setting the stage for a late harvest. Temperatures in the early summer stayed mostly below 80°, then heated up in August and September. Harvest began in late September and finished up on October 23, yielding around 2.4 tons per acre.

TASTING NOTES

Color very dark, nearly opaque. Remarkable viscosity. Closed at first, then opening to a slightly minty, very fresh and bright character containing earth, mineral, and distinctive forest floor aromas. Very dense flavors with an abundance of black currant, minerals, smoked herbs, and blackberry, followed by cedar, coffee and vanilla. Higher acidity and a lower pH profile play a key role in creating a sense of balance and energy.

1994 rightfully ranks as one of California's greatest modern-day vintages and the 1994 Harlan Estate is clearly one of our best. Very classic, with lots of detail and energy. Hold for a few more years, then savor for 25-30 years so as not to miss the further complication of this stellar vintage.

1995

An extremely wet winter, with 25 days of rain in January, followed by 18.5 inches in March. Late March budbreak, and bloom on May 31. Persistent rainfall caused considerable shatter in the clusters. Summer temperatures served up "ripening weather" and produced a phenolically mature crop. Harvest began on September 5 and ended on the 26, yielding 2.0 tons per acre.

TASTING NOTES

Very dark, deep-ruby color. Aromatics include coffee bean, toasty smoky notes, and vanilla, black and blue fruits, earth, mineral notes, herbs, dried sage, and green olive, showing nuanced bottle bouquet. The mouth entry is full and fleshy, with spectacular purity through the mid-palate; layers of ripe fruit flavors, black olive, and spice. Elegant and long.

Very showy and hedonistic when first released, the voluptuousness and lush fruit of its youth has retreated sufficiently to reveal a complex expression of the site-distinctive, earthy character. Drinkability: now to 20+ years.

THE MAIDEN

From the outset, we have taken great satisfaction in the slow but continuous evolution of the estate—and in watching the wines become increasingly pleasing and complex. Over time, we have also seen our younger vines reach a level of maturity capable of producing wonderful wines, even if they were not quite ready for the final Harlan Estate blend. We felt these lots, along with other components not utilized in our flagship wine, deserved a label of their own. Beginning with the 1995 vintage, we bottled a small number of cases under the name The Maiden. Grown and vinified to the same exacting standards as Harlan Estate, The Maiden is a highly detailed and sumptuous wine, remarkably faithful to the vineyard's pedigree; tasting notes are not included in this volume.

1996

Heavy winter rainfall (48+ inches) and spring rains lasting into May. A relatively warm summer with periodic heat spells speeded *véraison* and ripening, while a cooling trend in September allowed grape flavors and phenolics to catch up with sugars. Harvest began in mid-September and lasted until the first week of October. Yield averaged 2.1 tons per acre.

TASTING NOTES

Saturated ruby red, with bright highlights. Lovely nose dominated by spicy black currant, tobacco leaf, and cedar-scented notes. Showing the beginnings of bottle bouquet, with slight celery-like herbal flair, cinnamon, and spice. The entry is soft and silky. Across the palate the impression is firm, but generous in the mouth. Classic cigar box and spice complement the finish.

A solid vintage, showing very well today, with good aging potential. Drinkability: now to 20+ years.

1997

Copious winter rains through January, slowing through the spring, set the stage for a late-March budbreak. Temperatures hovered between 80° and 90° from May into September, with only 33 days topping 90°. Scant rain in early September, followed by some days with elevated temps. Harvest concluded September 26. Average yield was 2.75 tons per acre.

TASTING NOTES

Color very dense, nearly opaque. Very ripe, concentrated aromatics of vanilla, minerals, coffee, blackberries, licorice, cassis, prune, and shoyu, with high notes of bright red and black fruits behind. The flavors are very thick, ripe, layered, and supple on the palate, with tremendous power and density. The flavor profile is broad, jammy—almost confectionary—and very complex, yet displaying a balance of acidity. Tannins and alcohol harmonize to show an uncommon richness.

A big vintage with a big personality—at times problematic, at other times brilliant—even better now, having emerged from a period of metamorphosis. Drink with hearty food now and for the next 30 years.

1998

On the heels of an El Niño winter marked by near-record rainfall, spring rains tapered, with only 2-3 inches in each of March, April, and May. Summer was cool, with temperatures barely topping 90° only 35 times. September, however, had nine days above 90°. October temperatures hovered between 70° and 80°. An extended *véraison* began in late August and finished around September 7. Significant crop reduction—by half, in an already low-yielding year—helped achieve unprecedented ripeness, maturity, and concentration. Harvest was completed on November 5, yielding a record low 0.9 tons per acre.

TASTING NOTES

Medium depth of color, just a hint of mahogany at the edge. Still showing fresh aromas, with dominant notes of red currant, espresso, minerals, blueberry, tobacco, licorice, and a touch of chocolate mint. A lovely, elegant wine, it shows remarkable purity, density, and depth of concentration and has a very unctuous texture and juicy sweet tannins in the finish.

After rigorous selection, the final blend in 1998 ended up to be 100% cabernet sauvignon. Drinking very nicely now, it should continue to do so for many (15+) years.

1999

Near-average (25.8 inches) winter rainfall lingered through April. Budbreak came April 10-15. Moderate temperatures in May and June gave way to warm mid-summer temps. The late-arriving harvest did not begin until September 28 and lasted until October 22. Yields ranged from a lowly 1.0 ton per acre for the petit verdot to 1.7 tons per acre for the merlot and cabernet sauvignon.

TASTING NOTES

Bright, intense red, with slight garnet edge. A concentrated and dense, almost brooding wine, with moderately intense aromas of sweet vanilla, espresso, chocolate, mint, and cassis, and additional notes of tobacco, forest floor, figs, prunes, and black olives. A silky entry, with a focused mid-palate, finishing long and elegant, with a touch of the *sauvage* in the finish.

A very nice overall impression. Enjoy now, then for 15+ years.

2000

A normal budbreak and average winter rainfall set the stage for a somewhat early harvest, but those plans were modified by cooler-than-normal summer temperatures. Some days in June and September broke 100°, but most of the growing season hovered below 80° highs (and those highs didn't hold for very many hours throughout the day). Consequently, harvest was a long, drawn-out affair, beginning September 11 with the youngest merlot vines and continuing in fits and starts through October 24. Average yield: 2 tons per acre.

TASTING NOTES

Color is medium-dark red. Aromatically there are pronounced notes of roasted coffee, black currants, cedar, tobacco and ripe fruit. An almost confectionery quality comes through, as well, and shows the beginning signs of bottle bouquet with the associated complex, ripe-fruit aromatics. The wine shows real elegance on the palate, a focused purity of fruit, silky textured mid-palate, and soft, layered tannins. The distinctive, wild finish is supple and persistent.

A very enticing wine with balance and a high pleasure factor. A good candidate for current and near-term drinking, it seems age-worthy for another 7-10 years.

2001

Average winter rainfall tapered off through March and April. A warm May and June accelerated the growing season. With the exception of an oddly cool July, temperatures throughout the summer maintained that momentum. Picking began on September 5, then temperatures dipped into the upper 70's for the next two and a half weeks and slowed ripening. Harvest resumed and finished by October 4, thanks to a little "Indian Summer" heat boost. Yields were quite low: 1.5 tons per acre on average, even lower for the merlot blocks.

TASTING NOTES

Deep, ruby red. Well-focused, signature aromas of underbrush and forest floor abound in this wine. Also notes of tea, tobacco, mocha, leather, licorice, cedar, black currant, and violets. It is a wine of considerable depth, complexity, and staying power. A rich and full entry follows with equal measures of power and elegance. Ripe, supple tannins are present in the finish and contribute to its extended staying power, lift, and length.

A wine of purity, definition, and harmony that combines a more elegant, structured style, similar to the 1994 with the ripe, viscous qualities of the 1997. The wine is classic Harlan Estate, with a very long life ahead of it, though much of its potential is still in hiding. Lay this one down for 5+ years and then drink for 30+ (50?) years.

2002

Coming off a drier-than-normal winter, a somewhat early budbreak began April 1. Temperatures throughout spring and into the summer were erratic, with rain off and on through the end of May. Well-above-average temperatures alternated with lower-than-average daytime temperatures throughout most of the summer. Hot days in early September brought on a rapid onset of harvest. Temperatures moderated somewhat, then rose into the upper 90°s for several days in the third week of September and enabled ideal maturity. Harvest was short and sweet, spanning from September 16 to October 11. The hotter, shorter ripening period produced very concentrated, powerful, and exuberant wines. Average yield: 1.5 tons per acre.

TASTING NOTES

Deep, dark color—almost black. Classic cabernet sauvignon varietal nose, with notes of cedar, sage, mocha, black currant, smoke, and graphite. Shows explosive flavors of ripe fruit and earth notes with great density and complexity. Very dense, powerful, and rich. Backing up the ripe fruit flavors are uncommon layers of depth that keep going and going.

This is an opulent vintage showing a super-ripe richness, fruit, and purity, as well as a finely honed texture. Noble tannins, flamboyant flavors, and an open-knit structure allow for both near-term enjoyment and the prospect of long-term aging. Hold 2-5 years and then drink for 30+ years.

2003

The season overall was moderate in length (approximately 192 days), marked by a wetter-than-normal winter and rainfall extending into the end of May. A warm summer brought numerous days into the high 90°s and a couple of short-term heat spells in mid-September, culminating in a somewhat extended harvest period from September 17 to October 18. Cabernet sauvignon and cabernet franc yielded roughly 1.8 tons per acre on average; the merlot and petit verdot, considerably less.

TASTING NOTES

Deep, dark red in appearance. Complex nose offers high notes of black fruits, licorice, graphite, chocolate, espresso over truffle and earth, and the distinctive “forest floor” elements. Good composition, detail, concentration, and depth. Nice length, persistence and purity in the finish, but still relatively chunky in its youth. Look for this vintage to provide increasing finesse and pleasure over time. Wait 5 years and then drink for 10-15 years.

2004

Above-average rainfall (38 inches) ended in early spring. Budbreak was also early (March 18-27), as was bloom (mid-May). The summer was filled with 39 days over 90°, but very few over 100°. The season ended with some sweltering afternoons in the second week of September, but they were short in duration. Harvest began September 3 and everything was finished in about three weeks. A relatively small crop, yielding on average just 1.8 tons per acre.

TASTING NOTES

Very dense, ruby-red color. Though subdued at first, with some airing it displays notes of roasted coffee, charcoal, and blackberry against a background of sweet, toasty notes. Very ripe impression with good concentration and density. The entry on the palate is at once dense, fleshy, exuberant, and displays a high level of fine-grained, supple tannins that will certainly contribute to its textural interest and harmony for many years.

This is a vintage of exceptional charm from a ripe year. A beautifully concentrated wine—neither heavy nor overbearing—with sweet tannins, loads of ripe, juicy fruit, licorice, and a tremendous consistency. The wine shows bright, forward cassis and black fruits. Tempting now, but wait 3-5 years and then enjoy for 20 years or more.

2005

Above-average rainfall (38 inches) continued late into the growing season, delaying bloom and set. The balance of the season was truly cool, with only one day over 100° (and that was in June!) and 29 days over 90° for the balance of the season. After waiting for—and achieving—ideal maturity, a dramatically compressed harvest began on September 30 and concluded October 10. Average yield: 2.5 tons per acre.

TASTING NOTES

Vivid, dense red color. Nose slightly subdued, then—with further airing—showing vibrant blackberry, cassis, underlying earth, and forest floor. The 2005 is very concentrated, fleshy, and rich, with layers of complex flavors not often seen. The mid-palate texture is broad, dense, and seemingly sweet. Still young and integrating, with time it should reach a beautiful harmony.

A very intriguing vintage. Yields were just slightly above average; the alcohols, slightly lower and the acidity levels, slightly higher than we normally experience. Consequently the wine shows a much-appreciated focus and freshness. Very nice today. Drink now to 30+ years.

2006

Cold, wet (52+ inches) weather in winter and early spring delayed budbreak, but the ground dried out very quickly. Fast and vigorous shoot growth required diligent thinning. A warmer summer than 2005, but it was by no means a hot summer along the lines of 2001, 2002, or 2004. Harvest began on September 18, with deliberate ripening, and finished on October 31. Average yield: 1.8 tons per acre.

TASTING NOTES

At the time of going to press, the 2006 has been in the bottle for nearly a year. Its color is a full, deep ruby. The vibrant nose is rich in detail. The entry is currently intensely fruit-forward in a lively and refreshing way, with tremendous mouth-energy and layered flavors of blackberry, raspberry, tobacco, anise, and spice. There is a focus and linearity, reminiscent of the 1996 when it was in its youth, that bodes well for both early enjoyment and extended longevity. While it's in the early stages of its evolution, we feel it has great long-term potential.

2007

A superb growing season. Lower-than-normal rainfall (21 inches), mostly late in the winter. Spring was dry. Budbreak occurred April 17. A cool summer (only two days over 100° degrees and just twenty-six days over 90°) followed by an even cooler September, which allowed for a slow and deliberate ripening and a very reasonable harvest pace (September 4 through October 11). We managed optimal maturity in most all of the lots, yielding 2.2 tons per acre, on average.

TASTING NOTES

The master blend, still in barrels pending bottling in February of 2010, is extremely attractive now, possessing all the hallmark attributes: lavish aromatics, classically structured mouthfeel, and supple texture. This very promising vintage will be among our very best offerings.

2008

Lower-than-average rainfall in the winter followed by a dry spring. Budbreak on April 1, followed by a cold spell. (Our steep hillside sites were spared the spring frost damage that many others in the valley experienced.) A moderate summer, followed by a cool September with just 7 days over 90°. Harvest began on September 2 and finished on September 29. Average yield: 1.5 tons per acre.

TASTING NOTES

The individual lots of the 2008 vintage are consistently impressive and opulent. Currently aging in new French oak barrels in the second-year cellar, they will undoubtedly provide a wealth of very high-quality components for blending trials next spring.

2009

The third year in a row with below-average rainfall, 2009 will go down as being a relatively even growing season, with very few heat surges during the summer months. September provided ideal ripening conditions with 12 days in the 90's. Harvest began September 2. Nearly all lots were "in the barn" prior to a looming rainstorm (6 inches) that arrived on October 12. We gathered the final few blocks on October 18.

TASTING NOTES

At this writing, the 2009 vintage is still in various stages of production, with some tanks still being pressed off, others having been barreled down and undergoing malolactic. Overall, a superlative vintage.