

## Jonathan Cristaldi: My top Californian wines of 2023

After a year of innumerable tastings around his home state of California, Decanter's Napa Valley correspondent Jonathan Cristaldi reflects on standout wines from Napa, Sonoma and the Central Coast along with one unforgettable bottle from Tuscany...



Jonathan Cristaldi  
December 18, 2023



Decanter's Napa correspondent Jonathan Cristaldi, left, explains the finer points of Premiere Napa Valley to Decanter's US Editor Clive Pursehouse in February 2023.

My top picks of 2023 are a host of bottles that I found particularly rewarding and which are (mostly) available or will be in early 2024. Please read about them and why I chose them in the tasting notes below.

Here, I've composed a short recap of highlights from 2023 which, in case you missed some of the stories, are linked to below. It is a privilege being Decanter's Napa correspondent, and I'm so grateful for the hospitality extended to me, and all the time and energy wineries expended in welcoming me to their tasting table this year.

The first memorable tasting of 2023 came with an invitation to join one of Hollywood's most humble rock star violinists (and a WSET Level 4 Diploma holder) Natalie Leggett at Colgin. We both cooed over the 2019 Colgin IX Estate Syrah, a profound wine with immeasurable structure, elegance and downright deliciousness.

Later, I met up with another musical maestro, banjo legend Tony Trischka, and his wife Assunta, at Abbot's Passage Winery & Mercantile in Glen Ellen to taste Katie Bunsch's unique varietal blends. Worth seeking out!



# Decanter

February was packed with tastings: touring Heitz, Haynes, Ink Grade and Stony Hill with Master Sommelier Carlton McCoy; a lunch with the Araujo family (who later gave us **the scoop** on some big news with **Wheeler Farms**); and a day tasting 15 vintages of Quintessa back to 1994, followed by a chance encounter with Benoît Touquette of Realm Cellars.

In March, I dashed off to New York City to visit numerous 'Lighthouses' pouring Château d'Yquem by the glass and wrote about **the highly anticipated 2020 release**.

There were many tastings and interviews with other California luminaries, like **Darioush Khaeldi**, Lisa and **Philip Togni**, the Alejandro Bulgheroni team and their **Lithology** wines, a host of talented winemakers from **Diamond Creek**, **Merry Edwards**, **Scharffenberger**, **Domaine Anderson** and **Roederer Estate**, long interviews with Dave Phinney of **Orin Swift**, and the **Harlan masterclass** at the 2023 Decanter Fine Wine Encounter in New York.

The hours I spent at Screaming Eagle, at Morlet and with Paul Hobbs and Spottswoode tasting wines for my **2020 Napa Cabernet vintage report** proved bright and joyous in the midst of analysing the extremely challenging vintage.

A revelatory visit to Ojai to taste old vintages of Sea Smoke presented a show-stopping **2001 Pinot**, and I grew to enjoy smoking cigars and drinking Chardonnay while interviewing Jayson Woodbridge of Hundred Acre; a piece is forthcoming on his mythical world.

An afternoon tasting of four spectacular vintages of Mt Veeder-based **Pym-Rac** with owner Alfred Tesseron of Bordeaux fifth-growth Château Pontet-Canet ended with riveting glassfuls of Tesseron's XO Perfection 1er Cru de Cognac.

Finally, I'll leave you with these words from my notes tasting with Luc Morlet: 'Harmony. Legacy. Time.' Together, they form the fabric of all the wines from my distinctly Californian backyard: wines of harmony, stamped with grand notions of legacy, subject to the benefit of time.



# Jonathan Cristaldi's top wines of 2023:



Paula Kornell, Blanc de Noirs, Napa Valley, California, USA 2020

+ Add to My Wines

Paula Kornell debuted her namesake brand in 2017 in homage to her father, Hanns Kornell, who, in 1958, began producing Méthode Champenoise techniques on California grapes from his Larkmead...

Points 91



Summer Dreams, Walking on Venice Beach Sauvignon Blanc, Sonoma Coast, Sonoma County, California, USA 2022

+ Add to My Wines

In 2019, Jayson Woodbridge of Hundred Acre established Summer Dreams, making cool-climate Sonoma Coast Pinot, Chardonnay, and Sauvignon Blanc. A winery for Summer Dreams is being built outside...

Points 96



Pahlmeyer, Chardonnay, Napa Valley, California, USA, 2022

+ Add to My Wines

Having toured Stagecoach vineyard with Pahlmeyer winemaker Katie Vogt and talked at length about her strict focus on expressing site, I couldn't stop thinking about the Chardonnay wines I'd sampled. Near...

Points 95



Coil, Chardonnay, Petaluma Gap, Sonoma County, California, USA 2022

+ Add to My Wines

Winemaker Chris Phelps, who produces single vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon from Sleeping Lady Vineyard in Yountville for his Ad Vivum label, started COIL as a project with his son, winemaker Josh Phelps of...

Points 94



La Pelle, Sauvignon Blanc, Napa Valley, California, 2021

+ Add to My Wines

Winemaker Maayan Koschitsky, the director of winemaking for Atelier Melka, spends most of his days producing some of Napa's most opulent Cabernet Sauvignon wines from the region's renowned vineyards. So...

Points 93



Jacopo Biondi-Santi Castello di Montepò, Maceone, Maremma, Tuscany, Italy 2019

+ Add to My Wines

This 100% Sangiovese from the Biondi-Santi family's Castello di Montepò estate in Tuscany's Maremma is a wine I can't stop thinking about since first tasting it in October of 2023. 'Maceone' is one of three...

Points 98



Realm Cellars, The Bard Red Wine, Napa Valley, California, USA 2021

+ Add to My Wines

After sampling 86 wines over a two-day marathon tasting with Realm Cellars co-owners Scott Becker and winemaker Benoit Touquette, I had no doubt that one would make my top 10 list of the year. It would...

Points 97



OLG, Our Lady of Guadalupe Vineyard Pinot Noir, Sta Rita Hills, Santa Barbara County, California, USA 2022

+ Add to My Wines

Early in the year, I began interviewing Dave Phinney for an article that appeared in the March 2023 print issue of Decanter, and while we talked about Our Lady of Guadalupe, his vineyard project in the Sta. Rita Hills...

Points 96



Calera, Jensen Vineyard Pinot Noir, Mount Harlan, San Benito County, California, USA 2021

+ Add to My Wines

In their youth, the Calera Pinot Noir wines are typically restrained and can even be aromatically stunted. They are more giving on the palate, with pure fruit flavours that have excellent concentration balanced by...

Points 95



Denali Estate, Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley, California, USA 2016

+ Add to My Wines

I first learned about the Denali estate in the hills above Napa Valley's St. Helena AVA during tastings with winemaker Jean Hoefliger, who began producing the Denali Estate wines in 2019. I tasted single-vineyard...


Points 93



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## Realm Cellars, The Bard Red Wine, Napa Valley, California, USA 2021

My Wines

 SINGLE TASTING

97

**Tasted by:** Jonathan Cristaldi  
(at Novato, California, 07 Dec 2023)  
**Part of** Jonathan Cristaldi: My top Californian wines of 2023  
**Drinking Window:** 2024 - 2040

After sampling 86 wines over a two-day marathon tasting with Realm Cellars co-owners Scott Becker and winemaker Benoit Touquette, I had no doubt that one would make my top 10 list of the year. It would be The Bard, which will be available beginning in 2024. It is a very giving wine that promises great rewards for long-term cellaring and is enjoyable three full nights in a row, never losing its zeal if having one great glass each night is your prerogative. Power and muscle frame the core of this towering red, with its red-toned fruits and rich, toasty oak spices nuanced by bay Laurel and pastis. Full-bodied with tremendous decadence of chocolaty tannins that are pliant and billowy, lifted by supple blackberry and black raspberry fruit, a drizzle of cherry coulis, and resolving with refined tobacco, cedar wood spices, and laced with coriander and cumin aromatics. It has a satisfyingly rich finish. Number five of my top 10 wines of 2023.

