

Heitz Cellar, Martha's Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon 1974

Napa Valley, California

A legend because...

Joe Heitz had been quick to recognise the potential of this Oakville vineyard, and regularly purchased its grapes. He first made a vineyard-designated wine from Martha's Vineyard in 1966, and the 1968 vintage was widely acclaimed, as was the 1974 – a vintage that produced many outstanding Cabernets from various parts of California.

Looking back

Heitz was already by this time an acclaimed producer with a deserved reputation for his wines. However, in 1974 he injured his back, so the wine was actually made by his son David, still winemaker at Heitz today. David would commute to his father's hospital bed, bringing tank samples to be tasted, and returning with instructions on how to proceed. Hence the 1974 vintage could be seen as a joint effort. David recalls: 'It represents the collaboration and mutual admiration between a father and son and the first vintage of my career.'

The vintage

In Napa the '74 spring was cool, the summer moderate, and the autumn warm, conditions that allowed a generous crop to ripen steadily. The harvest, which continued into October, took place during hot weather. The Cabernets were concentrated, rich and tannic, and seemed assured of a long life in bottle. Some wines never shed those youthful tannins and proved disappointing, but the top wines, including Martha's Vineyard, went the distance. However, by the late 1990s, many bottles were beginning to fade, and today there is inevitable bottle variation.

The terroir

This celebrated site on a gravelly bench on the west side of Napa in Oakville was planted in 1961 by Bernard and Belle Rhodes, but sold two years later to Tom and Martha May, who gave it its name. The first vintage was 1966. The 15 hectare site has less direct exposure to sunlight than some neighbours, and this gives a longer growing season and, arguably, more finesse to the wines. Their quality may also be attributed to the original plantings, which always produced small berries and loose bunches, ensuring a very dark and concentrated wine. Initially dry-farmed, Martha's Vineyard has been irrigated since it was replanted in the 1990s.

The wine has often been marked by a pronounced eucalyptus tone, especially on the

'David Heitz would commute to his father's hospital bed, bringing tank samples to be tasted'

nose. There were eucalyptus trees fringing the vineyard, but Joe Heitz never believed they affected the wine. He noted many other vineyards flanked by eucalyptus that didn't have this tone, and he always believed the aroma derived from the clone.

The wine

Today Joe Heitz's winemaking would be considered idiosyncratic and old-fashioned, but in the 1970s there was less agreement about the best winemaking techniques for Cabernet Sauvignon.

The vineyard was always harvested selectively, giving five or six lots for Heitz to work with.

After fermentation in steel tanks the wine would have been aged in 1,000-gallon American oak vats for nine months, then transferred to barrels made from Limousin oak, which Heitz greatly preferred to US oak barrels. Here it would remain for 30 months, until Heitz considered the oak and fruit were in perfect balance; then the wine was fined, filtered and bottled.

The reaction

'One of California's greatest classics', in the view of *Decanter's* Michael Broadbent. In 2000 he noted the wine as 'still deep, fairly intense; unmistakable eucalyptus nose; crisp, high extract, excellent flavour and length. Great wine'. In 2009, Stephen Brook, DWWA Regional Chair for the US, recorded: 'The nose is splendid, rich and smoky, ripe and intense, yet showing ample lift and freshness. Medium bodied, yet intense and highly concentrated. It remains fresh and limpid, with purity and considerable drive.' In 2012, the wine topped a tasting for *FINE* magazine of 140 wines from the 20th century, ahead of 1929 Pétus, 1947 Cheval Blanc, and many other iconic wines. **12**

THE FACTS

Bottles produced 52,125, plus 1,200 magnums

Composition 100% Cabernet Sauvignon

Yield N/A

Alcohol 13%

Release price \$25

Price today \$1,618 (£1,032 - average price)

