

Robert M. Parker, Jr.'s

The WINE ADVOCATE®

The Independent Consumer's Bimonthly Guide to Fine Wine

SHAFFER VINEYARDS

2003	CABERNET SAUVIGNON	NAPA	(release date 3/06)	RED	(90-92)
2002	CABERNET SAUVIGNON	NAPA	(\$54.00; release date 3/05)	RED	91
2001	CABERNET SAUVIGNON	NAPA	(\$52.00)	RED	90
2003	CABERNET SAUVIGNON HILLSIDE SELECT STAGS LEAP	NAPA	(release date 9/07)	RED	(94-98)
2002	CABERNET SAUVIGNON HILLSIDE SELECT STAGS LEAP	NAPA	(release date 9/06)	RED	(98-100)
2001	CABERNET SAUVIGNON HILLSIDE SELECT STAGS LEAP	NAPA	(release date 9/05)	RED	99
2000	CABERNET SAUVIGNON HILLSIDE SELECT STAGS LEAP	NAPA	(\$150.00)	RED	93
2003	CHARDONNAY RED SHOULDER RANCH	NAPA/CARNEROS	(\$40.00)	WHITE	91
2002	CHARDONNAY RED SHOULDER RANCH	NAPA/CARNEROS	(\$38.00)	WHITE	94
2001	CHARDONNAY RED SHOULDER RANCH	NAPA/CARNEROS	(\$37.00)	WHITE	90
2003	FIREBREAK (Sangiovese/Cabernet Sauvignon)	NAPA	(release date 3/06)	RED	(88-90)
2002	FIREBREAK (Sangiovese/Cabernet Sauvignon)	NAPA	(\$36.00)	RED	91
2001	FIREBREAK (Sangiovese/Cabernet Sauvignon)	NAPA	(\$35.00)	RED	89
2003	MERLOT	NAPA	(release date 9/05)	RED	(89-91)
2002	MERLOT	NAPA	(\$41.00)	RED	88+
2001	MERLOT	NAPA	(\$39.00)	RED	90
2003	RELENTLESS	NAPA	(release date 9/06)	RED	(92-94)
2002	RELENTLESS	NAPA	(release date 9/05)	RED	(92-94)
2001	RELENTLESS	NAPA	(\$60.00)	RED	93

One of the world's greatest wineries and again one of my wineries of the year for 2004, Shafer Vineyards is the quintessential example of how a family-run winery should conduct its affairs. Whatever they turn out is superb, and of course everything is done in an uncompromising fashion thanks to the extraordinary triumvirate of winemaker/vineyard manager Elias Fernandez and the father and son team of John and Doug Shafer.

They make one of the best non-malolactic, barrel-fermented Chardonnays in California, although it is a wine that needs to be consumed during its first 2-3 years of life, but wow, what enjoyment it provides. The good news is there are close to 5,000 cases in an abundant vintage, although production over recent years has been somewhat less than that. The 2001 Chardonnay Red Shoulder Ranch seems already to have passed its joy period, although it is still an outstanding wine with good acidity, loads of honeysuckle, peach, apricot, and some white currants. The wine needs to be drunk over the next 6-12 months. Right now it is the 2002 Chardonnay Red Shoulder Ranch that wins all my accolades with its notes of marmalade, apricot, honeysuckle, and citrus oil in a classic, full-bodied style with good underlying acidity. It should drink well for another 1-2 years. The 2003 Chardonnay Red Shoulder Ranch is cut from the same mould, with a bit more orange peel and tropical fruit. Medium to full-bodied, with good acidity but not the weight and overall headiness and complexity of the 2002, nevertheless it is still a stunning California Chardonnay to drink over the next 2-3 years.

Shafer's Merlot program continues to get better and better. About 10-

15% Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon are incorporated into the final blend, giving the wine a bit more edge and aromatic complexity. These are not shy wines, usually topping the scales at 14-14.5%, but they are elegant and impressive from a varietal perspective. The 2001 Merlot is the best regular Merlot I have tasted from Shafer, an elegant, medium-bodied, restrained, but attractively styled wine with loads of licorice and berry fruit and a hint of mocha coffee bean. Luscious, sexy and understated, this is a beauty to drink over the next 5-7 years. The 2002 Merlot shows a bit more density and tannin in a chunkier style without the breeding and elegance of the 2001, but there is plenty of substance here. If it all rounds into shape with another year or two in the bottle, it could be quite nice. Anticipated maturity: 2006-2012. As for the 2003 Merlot, this wine is an inky ruby/purple, with a big, sweet nose of smoke, black currants, plums, and cherries. It is full-throated and easily the most muscular and powerful of the three vintages. Whether it develops the finesse of the 2001 remains to be seen. Anticipated maturity: 2007-2014.

Sangiovese has largely failed in California and is now generally being uprooted or replaced by wineries intent on planting Syrah in its place. However, Shafer continues to make one of the finest California Sangioveses, although they consistently blend it with 7-10% Cabernet Sauvignon. The results are stunning. The wines see no new oak, and the 2,400 cases produced spend 26 months in neutral and used American wood to preserve their fruit and fragrance. The 2001 Firebreak (93% Sangiovese and 7% Cabernet Sauvignon) reveals

strawberry and cherry notes intermixed with saddle leather, tobacco, and herbs. Medium-bodied with abundant fruit and fragrance, it is a classic food wine to drink over the next 3-4 years. Even better is the stunning 2002 Firebreak, a blend of 91% Sangiovese and 9% Cabernet Sauvignon. A terrific nose of briary fruit intermixed with strawberries, charcoal, and new saddle leather jumps from the glass of this dense, medium-bodied, sweet, round, sexy red. With admirable complexity as well as a forward precociousness, it is one of the best Firebreaks I have tasted to date. It should drink well for another 5-7 years. The more earthy, leathery, tougher-styled 2003 Firebreak (92% Sangiovese and 8% Cabernet Sauvignon) is medium-bodied and high strung, with attractive strawberry and cherry notes intermixed with herbs and loamy soil notes. Drink it over the next 5-7 years.

The more widely available Cabernet Sauvignon that comes from some of the 210 acres that the Shafers own has also gotten stronger over recent vintages. The 2001 Cabernet Sauvignon is showing even better this year than it was last year. This wine sees a combination of both French and American oak. The result is a wine with loads of smoky black currant notes intermixed with some earth, tobacco, and a hint of white chocolate. It is medium-bodied, supple-textured, and ideal for drinking over the next 10-12 years. One of the finest Cabernet Sauvignons to date from Shafer is the 2002, a beautifully made wine that shows a dense ruby purple color and a big, sweet nose of flamboyant black currant fruit intermixed with hints of chocolate, tobacco, earth, and oak. A beautiful wine that is medium to full-bodied, elegant, with nothing out of place, it should drink well for at least 10-15 years. The 2003 is clearly the best Shafer regular Cabernet made to date, as nearly two-thirds of the grapes for this wine emerged from their home vineyard. The wine is moving more toward the Hillside Select style, a wine of great concentration, complexity, and aging potential without losing its near-term accessibility. It is a just a beauty and a classic Stags Leap wine of floral, black currant, and raspberry-like elegance. With significant depth and a bit more power than previous renditions, this wine should age effortlessly for 10-15 or more years.

Named after their talented viticulturalist and winemaker, Elias Fernandez, the Relentless cuvée was introduced a few years ago and is a blend of 80% Syrah and 20% Petite Sirah aged 32 months in 100% new French oak. It is a terrific wine, and the good news is that there are about 2,500 cases produced. The 2001 Relentless shows a full-bodied powerful style, an inky purple color, and a big, peppery, blackberry and raspberry-scented nose with a hint of graphite and earth. Rich, full-bodied, but young and primary, this wine should drink nicely for 10-12 years. The 2002 Relentless (an identical blend) has an inky purple color to the rim, a big, sweet nose of vanilla, pepper, blue and blackberry fruit, and some chocolate and espresso roast in a sweet, plush, full-bodied

palate with high tannin, glycerin, and extract. It should drink well for 10-12 years. The softest and most exotic of these three vintages is the 2003 Relentless. Elegant, somewhat lighter styled compared to the two blockbusters preceding it, but still loaded with fruit, it has more nuances and greater potential complexity than its predecessors. Nevertheless, this is no shy wine, but does come across as a bit more feminine in style in this vintage. It is a beauty that should drink well for 10-12 years.

One of the world's finest Cabernet Sauvignons is Shafer's Hillside Select, a 2,000-case cuvée of 100% Cabernet Sauvignon aged 32 months in 100% new French oak prior to bottling. It is the top wine made in the Stags Leap region as well as one of California's most impressive Cabernets. Even in less than stellar vintages such as 2000 and 1998, the Hillside Select is a noteworthy wine. The 2000 Cabernet Sauvignon Hillside Select was performing even better this year than it was last year. While not as weighty and ageworthy as some of the more hallowed vintages, it is a seriously endowed wine. Deep ruby/purple to the rim, with a gorgeous nose of *crème de cassis*, licorice, graphite, spice, and cedar, it is more forward than most vintages, but full-bodied, concentrated, and beautifully seductive. Drink it over the next 15 or so years. The 2001 Cabernet Sauvignon Hillside Select is a potentially perfect wine in the making. A skyscraper that builds in the mouth with multiple dimensions, amazing layers of flavor, great delicacy, and tremendous purity, this inky purple-colored Cabernet offers extraordinarily pure *crème de cassis* notes intermixed with crushed rocks, flowers, sweet oak, an amazingly powerful yet impeccably balanced mid-palate, and a sweet, 70-second finish. This prodigious Cabernet Sauvignon is about as good as Cabernet can be. Equally impressive is the 2002 Cabernet Sauvignon Hillside Select. More muscular and flamboyant than the structured and restrained 2001, it boasts an explosive nose of *crème de cassis* intermixed with smoke, licorice, camphor, and vanilla. This full-bodied, extravagantly rich, opulent, dense, chewy 2002 possesses low acidity, tremendous concentration, and a fabulous finish. More sumptuous, lush, and voluptuous than the 2001, it will be showy young, but should age for 20-25 or more years. A lighter vintage than both 2001 and 2002, the 2003 Cabernet Sauvignon Hillside Select exhibits a surreal elegance, restraint, and beauty that comes across as a hybrid blend of a great Médoc and a Stags Leap Cabernet Sauvignon. Notes of flowers intermixed with black currants, blueberries, and minerals are present in this medium to full-bodied, pure, concentrated effort. It has a strikingly seamless personality despite being so young and still in barrel. The wine reveals style, nobility, and character, and should be approachable when released in several years. This looks like another candidate for two decades of aging potential. Tel. (707) 944-2877; Fax (707) 944-9454