



The Independent Consumer's Bimonthly Guide to Fine Wine

**RATING SYSTEM**

Robert Parker's rating system employs a 50-100 point quality scale. It is my belief that the various twenty (20) point rating systems do not provide enough flexibility and often result in compressed and inflated wine ratings. THE WINE ADVOCATE takes a hard, very critical look at wine, since I would prefer to underestimate the wine's quality than to overestimate it. The numerical ratings are utilized only to enhance and complement the thorough tasting notes, which are my primary means of communicating my judgments to you.

- 96-100** An extraordinary wine of profound and complex character displaying all the attributes expected of a classic wine of its variety. Wines of this caliber are worth a special effort to find, purchase, and consume.
- 90-95** An outstanding wine of exceptional complexity and character. In short, these are terrific wines.
- 80-89** A barely above average to very good wine displaying various degrees of finesse and flavor as well as character with no noticeable flaws.
- 70-79** An average wine with little distinction except that it is soundly made. In essence, a straightforward, innocuous wine.
- 60-69** A below average wine containing noticeable deficiencies, such as excessive acidity and/or tannin, an absence of flavor, or possibly dirty aromas or flavors.
- 50-59** A wine deemed to be unacceptable.

SHAFFER VYDS.	2009	CABERNET SAUVIGNON HILLSIDE SELECT	STAGS LEAP	(not yet released)	RED	(94-96)
SHAFFER VYDS.	2008	CABERNET SAUVIGNON HILLSIDE SELECT	STAGS LEAP	(not yet released)	RED	(97-99)
SHAFFER VYDS.	2007	CABERNET SAUVIGNON HILLSIDE SELECT	STAGS LEAP	(not yet released)	RED	98+
SHAFFER VYDS.	2006	CABERNET SAUVIGNON HILLSIDE SELECT	STAGS LEAP	(\$225.00)	RED	96
SHAFFER VYDS.	2009	CABERNET SAUVIGNON ONE POINT FIVE	STAGS LEAP	(not yet released)	RED	(91-94)
SHAFFER VYDS.	2008	CABERNET SAUVIGNON ONE POINT FIVE	STAGS LEAP	(\$75.00)	RED	92
SHAFFER VYDS.	2007	CABERNET SAUVIGNON ONE POINT FIVE	STAGS LEAP	(\$70.00)	RED	93
SHAFFER VYDS.	2009	CHARDONNAY RED SHOULDER RANCH	LOS CARNEROS	(not yet released)	WHITE	(88-90)
SHAFFER VYDS.	2008	CHARDONNAY RED SHOULDER RANCH	LOS CARNEROS	(\$48.00)	WHITE	92
SHAFFER VYDS.	2009	MERLOT	NAPA	(not yet released)	RED	(90-92)
SHAFFER VYDS.	2008	MERLOT	NAPA	(\$48.00)	RED	88
SHAFFER VYDS.	2007	MERLOT	NAPA	(\$48.00)	RED	90
SHAFFER VYDS.	2009	RELENTLESS	NAPA	(not yet released)	RED	(93-95)
SHAFFER VYDS.	2008	RELENTLESS	NAPA	(\$75.00)	RED	95
SHAFFER VYDS.	2007	RELENTLESS	NAPA	(\$75.00)	RED	95

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While still renowned for their portfolio of classic world-class reds, Shafer also turns out a terrific non-malolactic Chardonnay from the Red Shoulder Ranch. The only dramatic change made over recent years is that instead of 100% being barrel-fermented and oak-aged, 25% is now aged in stainless steel which has added freshness and possibly longevity. In an irregular year for North Coast Chardonnay, Shafer's **2008 Chardonnay Red Shoulder Ranch** is a winner. Elegant notes of orange blossoms, nectarines, pears and honeysuckle jump from the glass of this crisp, medium-bodied, richly fruity wine. Fresh, lively and flavorful, this impressive Chardonnay can be enjoyed over the next 2-3 years. The lighter-style **2009 Chardonnay Red Shoulder Ranch** does not have the intensity of the 2008, but those who enjoy more European-styled Chardonnays will adore it. This mid-weight white exhibits notes of lemon butter, tropical fruits and poached pears in a fresh, lively, crisp style. It should be bottled soon and released early in 2011.

Still turning out one of California's top Merlots, the **2007 Merlot** (which merited an identical rating last year) combines the elegance and classicism of the Stags Leap viticultural region with the rich berry and chocolaty fruit of Napa Valley. This sexy, lush, medium-bodied, pure Merlot will offer delicious drinking now and over the next 7-8 years. The **2008 Merlot** shows good freshness, mid-weight, not quite the flamboyance and intensity of the 2007, but lots of fruit as well as a seductive personality. It, too, should drink well for 7-8 years. The **2009 Merlot** includes 6-7% Cabernet Sauvignon as well as 1% Malbec. It may turn out to be the finest of these three vintages. Shafer had a very strong 2009 harvest that winemaker Elias Fernandez claims will be their best vintage of the last decade (very high praise given what they've accomplished). The deep purple-colored 2009 exhibits sweet aromas of black raspberries, black cherries, white chocolate and herbs. Medium-bodied and powerful as well as elegant and stylish, it will evolve for 10+ years.

Introduced several years ago, the Cabernet Sauvignon One Point Five cuvée is aged 22 months in 100% new French oak. It is meant to be a reference point Cabernet from Stags Leap priced lower than Shafer's limited production, usually monumental Hillside Select Cabernet Sauvignon. The beautiful **2007 Cabernet Sauvignon One Point Five** (7,000-8,000 cases produced) exhibits a dense purple color as well as a gorgeous perfume of boysenberries, black currants, subtle toast and spice and a slight floral component. The wine is medium to full-bodied with good acidity, a voluptuous texture and impressive purity and length. Drink this stunning Cabernet over the next 15 years. The **2008 Cabernet Sauvignon One Point Five** should turn out to be just as good. Slightly more powerful with sweeter fruit as well as more glycerin and fat, this is a big, full-bodied Stags Leap Cabernet offering abundant notes of roasted herbs, chocolate, cassis, incense and earth. Drink this deep, powerful 2008 over the next 10-15 years. The **2009 Cabernet Sauvignon One Point Five** may be the finest of this trio. It displays tremendous opulence, a voluptuous texture, an inky/ruby/purple color and a fresh, perfumed style that combines power with elegance. This wine should drink well upon release and evolve for 15 or more years.

Shafer's flagship offering is their monumental Cabernet Sauvignon Hillside Select (about 2,000 cases produced). Always 100% Cabernet Sauvignon aged for at least 30 months in oak, this is one of Napa's most profound wines. The **2006 Cabernet Sauvignon Hillside Select**, which

was just released, is a stunningly rich effort displaying notes of licorice, cassis, camphor and subtle toast along with a full-bodied, powerful texture and richness. Very pure with surprisingly sweet tannins for a 2006, it's long finish lasts over 40 seconds. It should drink well for 25+ years. The **2007 Cabernet Sauvignon Hillside Select** has the potential to be a perfect wine in 5 to 6 years. Although it has shut down since I tasted it last year, it is unquestionably Shafer's finest Hillside Select since the 2001 and 2002. It needs 2-3 years of bottle age and should keep for 35+ years. This selection is made from the Eisele clone of Cabernet Sauvignon planted in a choice 50-acre parcel. It takes concentration, graciousness and complexity to its highest level in Napa Valley. An inky/blue/purple color is followed by sweet aromas of blueberries, blackberries, charcoal and subtle toast. The wine possesses fabulous concentration, a seamless/flawless personality, a textbook integration of alcohol, wood, tannin and acidity, an almost endless finish and a voluptuous texture. Exhibiting more tannin and structure than it did last year, this is a colossal wine that will still be going strong in 2050. The **2008 Cabernet Sauvignon Hillside Select** may turn out to be nearly as good. A great success for the vintage and further proof of just how good this year can be for Napa Bordeaux varietals, it boasts an opaque purple color as well as a big, sweet bouquet of white chocolate, espresso roast, oak, *crème de cassis*, blackberries and camphor. A potential candidate for the wine of the vintage, it is dense, full-bodied, rich, powerful and well-balanced. This is another compelling effort from Elias Fernandez and his two bosses, Doug and John Shafer. This 2008 should be fabulous when released in 2012, and last for 30+ years. An early look at the **2009 Cabernet Sauvignon Hillside Select** suggests this will be one of the estate's most precocious efforts yet made. Already strutting its stuff, it is not as concentrated as the 2008 or 2007, but it is no wimpy wine. The sweetness of the tannin, beautiful precociousness and evolved style suggest a charmer in the making. Full-bodied with loads of depth and texture, this seductive 2009 should age for 15 or more years.

Since 1999, Shafer has made a Syrah/Petite Sirah blend (usually 80% of the former and 20% of the latter) aged 32 months in 100% new French oak. The first vintage, the 1999 Relentless, which they opened at the winery to show how well it is aging, is still a baby at age 11. I rated it 96 points, which is higher than the 93 points I gave it in 2002. So much for California Syrah not aging well! The 1999 is still intense with a plum color and lots of grilled meat, herb, licorice and spice characteristics. The current release, the **2007 Relentless**, exhibits a dense purple color as well as notes of grilled herbs, tar, blackberries, cassis, pepper and *jus de viande*. This full-bodied powerhouse should last at least 15-20 years. Another thoroughbred in the making is the **2008 Relentless**. Full-bodied with sensational extract and richness, its opaque purple color is followed by terrific smoky barbecue notes, full-bodied opulence and tremendous depth, power and richness. This stunning Syrah can be drunk over the next 15-20 years. The **2009 Relentless** possesses the softest, most beguiling, fruit-forward personality of any Relentless made to date. It reveals polished tannins that are almost completely obscured by the sweetness of the fruit and the open-knit, lush, evolved style. It will be interesting to see how this wine turns out given the long aging in barrel. It's already a beauty, and I could have actually drunk a glass or two if I hadn't had a full day of appointments ahead of me. Tel. (707) 944-2877; Fax (707) 944-9454