

Decanter

Cristaldi: The age of cellar-worthy California Sauvignon Blanc

If somewhere along the vinous path, you were told, or heard, or were led to believe that California-grown Sauvignon Blanc doesn't age – think again. Jonathan Cristaldi makes a case for California's other ageworthy wine in Napa and beyond.



Jonathan Cristaldi July
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Credit: Patrik Stedrak / Getty Images/ iStockphoto

Sauvignon Blanc that ages like a red? Believe it.

Over the past decade, I've lost count of how many times I've sat down with winemakers across California who are immensely proud to show off their 'Bordeaux Blanc-style' ageworthy white wines.

The conversation surfaces most often in Napa and Sonoma as well as throughout Mendocino and Santa Barbara, centring on Sauvignon Blanc-based wines that might include a touch of Sémillon – or more rarely, Sauvignon Gris or Sauvignon Musqué.

It got me thinking: what does it mean to be California-based and profess to be making a white wine in the mould of superlative Bordeaux standouts, like Haut-Brion Blanc, Château Smith-Haut Lafitte Blanc from Pessac-Léognan, or Château d'Yquem's Bordeaux Supérieur 'Y' (Ygrec)?

These three wines frequently crop up as inspiration for California producers striving to craft structured, ageworthy whites.

Scroll down for Jonathan's pick of ageworthy California Sauvignon Blanc

There's an undeniable echo of Old World familiarity in these New World whites – citrus-led, with pronounced minerality and vivid acidity, supple textures, and an array of nuances from fresh and dried flowers to honey, honeycomb, honeysuckle, orchard and stone fruits, hints of vanilla, and some subtle nuttiness, typically like crushed Marcona almonds.

While much of this character stems from site nuance, unquestionably the winemaker's tool kit plays a significant role: prized fruit handled through a mix of native and inoculated fermentations, often begun in oak (with varying levels of newness and maybe even whole cluster), followed by regular *bâtonnage*, extended barrel ageing, time on lees before blending and bottling – and, in some cases, extended bottle age before release.

Only in recent years have I fully appreciated how many Napa-based producers are pursuing their own Bordeaux Blanc ideal.

As I make my rounds tasting **Cabernet Sauvignon for my annual vintage report**, winemakers inevitably uncork a white as a palate refresher to close our session. More often than not, these wines are strikingly weighty, with layered textures and complex flavours that leave me wanting more, usually prompting me to ask if any older vintages are on hand. There are almost always bottles lying in wait.

Recipes for success



Credit: Jak Wonderly

At Arkenstone, owner and co-founder Susan Krausz and her son, Jake, hosted me for a vertical tasting of their Howell Mountain-grown Sauvignon Blanc with winemaker Sam Kaplan presenting each vintage from 2006–2022.

The winemaking approach at Arkenstone has been remarkably consistent over the years. As described by Kaplan, Sauvignon Blanc grapes spend around 11 months on the lees, ‘with Sémillon blended in after the first racking’.

While the percentage of new oak was initially modest, ‘it has gradually increased over time’, he explains, adding that ‘native yeast fermentation has been a hallmark of our style, and we conduct native in barrels and, more recently, in concrete eggs’.

Long, slow, and cold ferments preserve freshness as plainly evident in my first sip of the 2006. After 18 years in the bottle, it was startlingly fresh, layered with enticing savoury chamomile tea, straw, and confectioned caramel, toffee, candied apricot, and orange zest.

Silken, braced by acid tension and focused. The colour alone, lemony-bright with gold hues, belied its age.

Susan Krausz thinks the extended sunshine hours on Howell Mountain contribute to the ripeness they see in their Sauvignon Blanc, while the volcanic ash soils aid in preserving lower pH levels – and hence, freshness.

At Lail Vineyards, a partnership between fourth-generation vintner Robin Daniel Lail and her daughters, Erin and Shannon, winemakers Maayan Koschitzky and Philippe Melka craft the wines.

I listed their 2019 Lail Vineyards Georgia white – a 100% Sauvignon Blanc from Lail's Totem Vineyard in Yountville – as one of my top fine wines of 2022.

The first vintage produced of Georgia – named after Robin Lail's first grandchild – was the 2002. I was able to sample 10 vintages between 2005 and 2022 with Robin Lail and Maayan Koschitzky.

The lemony Sancerre-like style is remarkably consistent because, as Koschitzky points out, 'the winemaking has been consistent since the beginning, with fermentation and ageing in 100% new French oak for about 20 months, on the lees, with bâtonnage.'

The resulting wines are silken with bright citrus, stone fruits, and gravelly mineral thread. The finished pH is typically very low, between 3.0 and 3.2.

I also visited with Cherie and Philippe Melka to taste every vintage of their La Mekerra Vineyard Proprietary White, which comes from the 10.1 hectare La Mekerra Vineyard in Sonoma's Knights Valley – a stone's throw from Peter Michael's L'Après-Midi source.

The Melkas acquired La Mekerra in 2008. Just 0.8ha of Sauvignon Blanc vines growing between 700 and 760 metres are rooted in the site's clay soils. The first vintage bottled and released was the 2011.

French touch



The La Mekerra Estates Vineyard. Credit: Mariana Calderon

‘We barrel ferment and barrel age in all new French oak,’ explains Philippe, who speaks with absolute sincerity when he says: ‘I love Haut Brion Blanc and I wanted to see if I could make it here in California.’

Melka waxes poetic over the structure of whites, such as Robert Mondavi’s I-Block white and Fumé Blanc, which are made from older vines. Since Melka can’t will vines into old age, he looked for a hillside site to ‘obtain the complexity we wanted early on’.

La Mekerra is half native fermented, half inoculated with bâtonnage over 18–22 months, bottled, and aged 18 months before release. In recent years, Melka says he has reduced the new oak to 45–60% depending on the vintage, begun doing multiple vineyard picks for varying degrees of ripeness for blending, and traded out more typically 225-litre barrels for 265-litre cigar barrels, while reducing bâtonnage.

The most recent vintages (2019–2021) show a heady mix of subtle tropical fruit, flinty aromatics, honeysuckle, and lemon zest—or even flamed orange peel. On the

palate, they are expansive, driven by racy acidity, wet slate minerality, and balanced tension.

At the same time, the older bottlings boast dried herbs, riper stone fruits, chamomile notes, and layered spices with grippy tension.

Finally, the wine that inspired this article is Steve Matthiasson's Napa Valley White Wine – a wine I've enjoyed for over a decade and is in a blended class all its own.

The first vintage of this wine, the 2005, was inspired by Matthiasson's trip to Friuli, where he says, 'I observed the blending of different white grape varieties to craft a harmonious white wine.'

As such, Sauvignon Blanc is not the star grape, but is typically the majority of the blend, including Ribolla Gialla, Sémillon, and Tocai Friulano. The grapes are native yeast fermented in barrel (roughly 20% new) and aged nine months before bottling. There is no bâtonnage and no malolactic fermentation.

Matthiasson's Ribolla Gialla and Tocai Friulano are sourced from the Bengier vineyard (formerly Vare Vineyard) in the Oak Knoll District in the cool, foggy climes of Dry Creek Canyon, where vines are rooted in rocky, fluvial soils (George Vare obtained budwood from Josko Gravner in 2001 for the site).

The Sauvignon Blanc and the Sémillon are from Ryan's Vineyard, planted on a stretch of alluvial gravel off Big Ranch Road in the valley's centre in south Napa.

'The Sauvignon Blanc forms the acid-driven core,' explains Matthiasson, who has farmed these sites for more than two decades, 'while Ribolla Gialla contributes the mineral finish, and Sémillon adds flesh and honeyed beeswax notes. The Tocai Friulano acts as the binding glue.'

Steve emphasises that low alcohol –the wines are typically 13% or even under. 'We want to drink wine with moderate alcohol to enjoy it with our meal,' he says.

Steve's white wine is always remarkably fresh, balanced, and vibrant, defying its age. It showcases a typically solid acid-driven core around which notes of lemon and lime citrus, grapefruit, apricot, white peach, and pressed white flowers, framed by tension-defying acidity, are key to their cellar potential.

The case to call it ‘California style’



Chiara Mondavi makes the Sentium Sauvignon Blanc from Mendocino County. Credit: Leigh Ann Beverly

It's hard to imagine a future in which California's current and emerging producers don't continue to draw inspiration from the benchmark style of Bordeaux Blanc, often describing their wines as such.

And while the comparison may seem obvious – and indeed offers a familiar point of reference for collectors – the truth is far more compelling.

Across California, a growing number of dynamic, delicious white wines rival the excellence of those few, famous bottlings made within a handful of kilometres of the Garonne River.

They're crafted from exceptional vineyard sites from across the state, separated by hundreds of miles, with varying winemaking approaches to barrel fermentation and ageing – and many are built to cellar for decades.

Below are a handful of selections I've come across in the last couple of years, of ageworthy California whites from Santa Barbara to Mendocino, with blends primarily focused on Sauvignon Blanc.

Ageworthy Californian Sauvignon Blanc:



Arkenstone, Sauvignon Blanc, Howell Mountain, Napa Valley, California, USA 2013

The 2013 shows nothing but polish, with a vibrant saline edge that carries seamlessly from the nose through to the long finish. Medium-bodied, with gorgeous layers of pure stone and orchard fruits, pressed white flowers, honeycomb, and tangerine zest. A hint of Charentais melon adds elegance and a perfumed lift....

Points 98



Lail Vineyards, Georgia, Napa Valley, California, USA 2012

2012 marked the first in a string of drought years that extended to 2015. Incredibly aromatic, with beautifully integrated oak, citrus oil, mango, papaya and tangerine oil. Honeysuckle and honeycomb add further complexity to the nose. The wine is medium- to full-bodied, with a rich, oily texture balanced by vivid,...

Points 98



Lail Vineyards, Georgia, Napa Valley, California, USA 2023

(Barrel Sample) The 2023 Georgia Sauvignon Blanc opens with a vivid burst of citrus aromatics—lemon zest, lime blossom, and preserved Meyer lemon peel—layered over a gentle framework of warm oak and subtle vanilla cream. Nuances of white peach, crisp green apple, and Anjou pear follow, lifted by white acacia and...

Points 97



Arkenstone, Sauvignon Blanc, Howell Mountain, Napa Valley, California, USA 2022

Sourced from the 5.3-hectare Arkenstone Estate on Howell Mountain, this white blend consists of 94% Sauvignon Blanc and 6% Semillon. The wine is aged 11 months sur lie in a combination of concrete egg, new French oak, and used oak, followed by 18 months of bottle ageing. Set to release...

Points 96



Lail Vineyards, Georgia, Napa Valley, California, USA 2019

I had a chance to revisit this wine with Robin Lail in early March of 2025 at her home on Howell Mountain alongside select vintages going back to the 2005 release. In 2019, all cylinders were still firing. It has a pH of 3.3 and TA of 6, and was...

Points 96



Melka Estates, La Mekerra Vineyard Proprietary White, Knights Valley, Sonoma County, California, USA 2016

Fresh grapefruit and white flowers lead, with a chamomile richness and creamy apple building the palate from medium- to full-bodied. There's superb, focused tension—linear, with charming acidity that carries a delicate, lacy quality. The finish is quite long and fruit-driven, with beautifully pressed floral and honeyed notes, underpinned by a...

Points 96



Sentium, Sauvignon Blanc, Mendocino County, California, USA 2023

The 2023 release totals approximately 188 cases. This vintage delivers beautifully luscious fruit, marked by lemon-leaf pithiness and notes of crushed Marcona almonds. There's excellent tension and grip here, with the wine showing its hallmark medium-bodied richness and silky, satiny fruit character. Laced with vibrant acid tension, it finishes long...

Points

96



Accendo Cellars, Sauvignon Blanc, Napa Valley, California, USA 2014

Sourced from Ryan's Vineyard in Oak Knoll, the 2014 vintage shows a gentler expression than the 2013, with yellow apple, creamy lemon curd, and lime blossom aromas. The palate is supple and textured, framed by crushed Marcona almonds and soft citrus oil notes. The fruit has a plush quality, offering...

Points

95



Matthiasson, White Wine, Napa Valley, California, USA, 2023

A blend of 40% Sauvignon Blanc, 30% Ribolla Gialla, 24% Sémillon, and 6% Tocai Friulano. This wine is wonderfully fresh and zesty, offering a veritable fruit salad of tangerine, grapefruit, kiwi, white peach, and apricot, all drizzled with wildflower honey and sprinkled with a touch of sea salt. A beautiful,...

Points

95



Matthiasson, White Wine, Napa Valley, California, USA, 2017

A blend of 50% Sauvignon Blanc, 25% Ribolla Gialla, 20% Sémillon, and 5% Tocai Friulano. This is a beautifully layered and fragrant white wine from Matthiasson, featuring bright notes of candied Marcona almond, white pepper, and a hint of vanilla bean, complemented by a spray of tangerine zest and a...

Points

95



Melka Estates, La Mekerra Vineyard Proprietary White, Knights Valley, Sonoma County, California, USA 2013

Absolutely riveting, the 2013 offers beautiful dried Mediterranean herbs and a subtle, high-toned note of bay laurel. The palate boasts dynamic tension, with exotic fruits, apricot and pear jam, a chamomile note, and layered spices. It delivers tremendous length, warmth, intensity, and finishes with fabulous intensity and excellent weight, all...

Points

95



Arkenstone, Sauvignon Blanc, Howell Mountain, Napa Valley, California, USA 2019

Re-tasted in 2024 at the estate, this wine shows even more layers, energy, and expression than when first tasted several years ago. Orchard and stone fruits now dominate, with the youthful pithy grapefruit character having evolved into a more generous, ripe profile. Notes of straw, sage, and salty minerality add...

Points

94



Arkenstone, Sauvignon Blanc, Howell Mountain, Napa Valley, California, USA 2006

The winemaking approach at Arkenstone has been remarkably consistent over the years, focusing on precision and elegance. The wine spends around 11 months on the lees, with Sémillon blended in after the first racking. While the percentage of new oak was initially modest, it has gradually increased over time. Native...

Points 94



Lail Vineyards, Blueprint Sauvignon Blanc, Napa Valley, California, USA 2023

This vintage delivers all the richness expected of New World Sauvignon Blanc, with guava and apricot, accented by hints of vanilla, lemony citrus, white flowers, and orange oil. The palate offers excellent depth and density, layered with spiced ginger and stone fruit. The finish is long and lingering. Harvest stretched...

Points 94



Matthiasson, White Wine, Napa Valley, California, USA 2022

A blend of 46% Sémillon, 29% Ribolla Gialla, 23% Sauvignon Blanc, and 2% Tocai Friulano. This wine is bright and zesty, offering candied mineral notes, acacia honey, and Meyer lemon peel on the nose. Medium-bodied with a consistent flavour profile, the palate delivers more of the same vibrant character, accented...

Points 94



Matthiasson, White Wine, Napa Valley, California, USA 2012

A blend of Sauvignon Blanc, Ribolla Gialla, Sémillon, and a 5% splash of Tocai Friulano, this wine is native yeast fermented in barrel, with roughly 20% new oak, and aged for 9 months before bottling. There is no bâtonnage and no malolactic fermentation. The Ribolla Gialla and Sémillon are sourced...

Points 94



Rudd, Estate Sauvignon Blanc, Mt Veeder, Napa Valley, California, USA 2023

From their Mount Veeder estate, a blend of Sauvignon Gris and Sémillon. Didier Dagueneau and Jean-Bernard Delmas visited the property and advised Rudd on what to plant. The Sémillon adds mid-palate richness, while the Sauvignon Gris brings tension and length. Fermented in oak, amphora, and concrete, with no malolactic fermentation....

Points 94



Lail Vineyards, Blueprint Sauvignon Blanc, Napa Valley, California, USA 2018

Unlike Georgia, which leans toward a lemony Sancerre-like style, Blueprint is more tropical and passion fruit-driven, particularly in the aromatics, closer to what consumers often expect from a Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc. The wine is aged 8 months on the lees in the barrel, giving it texture and energy. Bright...

Points 93