

PRIVATE Clubs



From left, new sauvignon blancs from Vineyard 29, Lail Vineyards, and Melka Wines.

3 Sauvignon Blancs That Will Surprise You

BY MICHAEL KAPLAN | PHOTOGRAPHY BY GREG MILANO

Think of your typical sauvignon blanc, and you probably recall a wine that echoes grapefruit and tastes fairly dry. Most likely, it's a refreshing sipper, perfect on a warm afternoon, not very serious, and priced accordingly. The old paradigm went that way, but things have changed. Recognizing a market for high-end domestic whites that go beyond chardonnay, California wineries have been increasingly releasing sauvignon blancs that bring heavyweight intent to a lightweight grape.

Here, three fresh small-batch releases that exemplify the sauvignon blanc upgrade - and all produced for different Golden State wineries by the steady hand of freelance vintner and sauvignon blanc savior Philippe Melka, singled out by the *New York Times* for "making some of Napa's most influential wines." With their multiple flavor levels, these wines make you rethink what sauvignon blanc can be and take the grape into a pleasantly complex realm.

29 Estate Sauvignon Blanc 2011

Vineyard 29

St. Helena, Calif.

I opened a bottle of 29 Estate to share with a couple of friends. Oyster shells littered the table and we had already worked through a pedestrian sauvignon blanc. My friend's wife took a sip and declared, "It's a white wine with the complexity of a red wine."

Not a bad way of putting it. The Vineyard 29 offering is rich and full-bodied with citrus notes that you expect from a sauvignon blanc. But a lot more goes on. The wine bursts with levels of fruit flavor without being overly sweet.

The Vineyard 29 folks suggest treating their sauvignon blanc like a cabernet sauvignon: Serve it at 62 to 65 degrees, and pour it into a tall glass with a broad bowl for lots of sniffing and swirling. The suggestion may sound cocky at first, but try it their way - a few sips in, you'll realize it goes way beyond posturing. \$125

Pairing tip: Goes perfectly with fish such as sea bass and snapper.

Georgia Sauvignon Blanc 2011

Lail Vineyards

Yountville, Calif.

With this wine, you'll do a double take. You think you're being served a sauvignon blanc, but then you experience the velvety texture and floral notes and may think you're drinking a white Bordeaux. This is just a different kind of sauvignon blanc, with a long finish and a complex flavor profile that you hadn't expected to find - so long as you hadn't been cognizant of the high price. No less a critic than Robert Parker has described the Georgia as "potentially the most serious sauvignon blanc to ever come out of California."

Lail makes the wine from 100 percent sauvignon blanc grapes, grown on the Lail estate, and ages it for 18 months in new French oak barrels, which impart the finished product with lots of oaky flavor. \$120

Pairing tip: Matches well with roasted pork.

Mekerra Sauvignon Blanc 2011

Melka Wines

Knights Valley, Calif.

For the wine that bears his own name, Philippe Melka grows the grapes on a 10-acre vineyard situated 2,300 feet above Napa Valley. High elevations tend to smooth out tannins, an effect evident in this wine: flowery and rich with a hint of citrus floating around the flavor levels.

Melka, a Frenchman with a geology degree from the University of Bordeaux, took his first winemaking class out of sheer curiosity. He is big into soil - his vineyard's dirt is rich in clay and volcanic ash - and terroir (the act of creating wine redolent of the place where the grapes have been grown). Both interests show well in this wine. Taking in the bouquet, before the Mekerra even hits my palate, I'm thinking about warm afternoons in lush fields. It's the kind of transporting quality that is virtually impossible not to find alluring. \$145

Pairing tip: Lobster and crab complement this wine.



Wine's Next Wave