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Decanter

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BORDEAUX **100 TOP BUYS**

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WHAT TO BUY THIS CHRISTMAS:

**30 FANTASTIC WINES
FOR THE SEASON
(WHATEVER YOUR
BUDGET)**

**GREAT GIFTS FOR
WINE LOVERS**

**141 CALIFORNIA
PINOTS RATED**

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Plus: Australia's hot spots; Gascony festive menu

Festival time in Santa Barbara

By Kia McInerney

THIS year's Harvest Festival in the hills of Santa Barbara County offered a chance to click goblets with the region's most celebrated winemakers and sample its brightest stars. The excitement centred on Santa Rita Hills, the area's newest and coolest appellation. Sheer fruit power and concentration were on display, matched against the elegance and finesse associated with such prestige vineyards as Bien Nacido and Dierberg in the Santa Maria/Santa Ynez Valleys.

The gentlemen's rivalry served to raise the bar overall, while launching new players with cult potential. Flying Goat drew raves for its Pinot Noir, as did Fiddlehead's new-clones, new-vineyard Pinot. Palmina's northern Italian varietals were sell-outs upon release, and cellar-mate Brewer-Clifton enhanced its reputation



for collector wines in an elegant Burgundian style. Sea Smoke's small-lot Pinot Noir from its Southing and Botella vineyards were snapped up earlier this year. Below, a selection of highlights:

TOP WINES FROM THE RISING STARS

■ **Brewer-Clifton, Chardonnay, Sweeney Canyon, Santa Rita Hills 2002 ★★★★★**

Elegant Burgundian style, with a rich nose of citrus and toasted pecans, smooth palate, and an evolved finish. Up to 2007. \$59

Clockwise from top: vineyard at Andrew Murray; Taz Vineyards winemaker Jon Priest pours his wine for the festival visitors; Chris Burroughs of Sanford Winery

'The excitement centred on Santa Rita Hills, the area's newest and coolest appellation. Sheer fruit power and concentration were on display'

■ **Fiddlehead Cellars, 728 Pinot Noir, Fiddlestix Vineyard, SRH 2001 ★★★★★**

Silky yet powerful blend of Pommard and Dijon clones, dense black raspberry fruit and seductive bouquet. Up to 2008. \$38

■ **Flying Goat: Dierberg Pinot Noir 2001 ★★★★★**
Rancho Santa Rosa, Pinot Noir 2002 ★★★★★

The Dierberg is gutsy with a spicy nose and charisma. The 2002 Santa Rosa is even better, with a deep, cranberry nose and smooth finish. Up to 2007. \$32/\$34

■ **Palmina, Bianca, Santa Barbara County 2002 ★★★★★**

Blend of five white Piedmontese varietals.

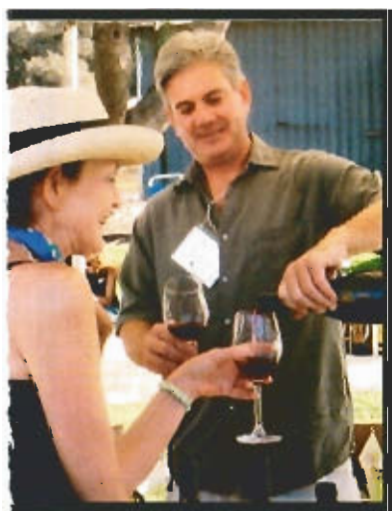


Clean, flinty nose, crisp palate and tangy finish. Up to 2007. \$20

■ **Palmina, Alisos, Bien Nacido Vineyard, Santa Barbara County 2002** ★★★★★
Rustic Sangiovese-Bordeaux blend with a raspberry bouquet and rich dark-cherry flavours. Up to 2007. \$20

BEST OF THE ESTABLISHED PLAYERS

■ **Sanford, Sanford & Benedict Vineyard, Pinot Noir, Santa Rita Hills 2001** ★★★★★
Classy and herbaceous with a



floral nose and light cherries. Spicy, warm and lively on the palate. Firm yet evocative finish. Now to 2008. \$43

■ **Tantara, Dierberg Vineyard Chardonnay 2001** ★★★★★
Burgundian refinement, with a bouquet of warm vanilla and lingering flavours of pear and fig. Up to 2007. \$38

■ **Whitcraft: 'Q', Pinot Noir, Bien Nacido Block 2000** ★★★★★
Melville Vineyard Pinot Noir 2001 ★★★★★

Pure French-style finesse from the Q-block's old Pommard clone, with restrained fruit and a lovely finish; Melville Vineyard's white-pepper nose and fruit power make the 2001 one to keep. Up to 2008. \$45

■ **Andrew Murray, Roasted Slope Syrah 2001** ★★★★★

Intense, lush nose of warm autumn fruits. A touch of Viognier adds piquancy and style until all melts away in a discreet and lingering finish. Up to 2007. \$32

■ **Jaffurs: Bien Nacido Vineyard, Syrah 2001** ★★★★★

Thompson Vineyard, Syrah 2001 ★★★★★
Vibrant fruit in a sensuous French-style in the first; powerfully extracted, with concentration and notes of dark chocolate-berry in the Thompson. To 2008. \$30-34

■ **Melville, 2002 Estate Chardonnay, Clone 76 Inox** ★★★★★

Chablis-style wine. Flinty and flawless, with a clean fresh scent. Up to 2006. \$28

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ONE TO WATCH



JUSTIN VINEYARDS & WINERY

Justin Baldwin of Justin Vineyards was among the first to explore the northwestern corner of Paso Robles (AVA), a much talked-about sub-region known today as 'Paso Robles Westside'. While many of his neighbours favour Zinfandel or Syrah, Baldwin has always believed in this area for red Bordeaux varieties. He developed 29ha on a former cattle ranch and in 1986 ventured into winemaking. Most of the hillside vineyards are non-irrigated and the fruit is hand-harvested. With vineyards enjoying slightly cooler weather and a much longer growing season than the rest of Paso Robles, Baldwin had a hunch that both Cabernet Franc and Merlot would do well. It turned out to be a brilliant move, particularly with Cabernet Franc. That wine provides bright fruit and lift to the winery's Cabernet Sauvignon based signature wine, 'Isosceles'. More recently, sites better suited to Cabernet Franc have replaced several earlier plantings, and the winery now subjects Cabernet, Merlot, and Cabernet Franc to a severe green harvesting at veraison to ensure even ripening of the fruit. Harvested and fermented individually, the three varieties that go into Isosceles are given a long maceration (15-22 days) and the assemblage is made 18 months later. The 2000 Isosceles, the winery's finest, was aged in small French oak (28% new) for 19 months and aged one year in bottle.

Justin Vineyards, Isosceles, Paso Robles 2000 ★★★★★

From a cool vintage, this is a breakaway wine worth every penny. Raspberry and blackberry fruit, with background notes of pencil lead, sweet oak, light toast and cocoa in the aroma. A rounded soft entry gives way to complex flavours of wild berry, cherry, spice and oak. It finishes with lovely blackcurrant character and light, refined tannins. 2006-2010. \$55; US MARKETS

By Norm Roby