



# International Wine Cellar

the consumer's passport to fine wine

**Larkmead.** The 140-acre Larkmead property, one of Napa Valley's largest remaining family operations, is located on Larkmead Lane between St. Helena and Calistoga. It offers a wide range of soil types well-suited to Bordeaux red varieties, according to winemaker Andy Smith. The portion of the property planted on an old river basin atop 200 feet of gravel is an ideal spot for low-yielding cabernet (this fruit has been purchased by David Ramey and Jayson Pahlmeyer, among others), while gravel and clay with red volcanic topsoil gives an irony minerality to the estate's merlot. On the eastern side of the Napa River there's more classic valley floor loam, which yields dense, full-bodied petit verdot, malbec and cabernet franc. Smith told me that the 2002 and 2003 vintages produced wines here with similar tannic structure. The 2002s possess more buffering extract, he added, but the 2003s may be purer and more precise.

Larkmead  
Vineyards



Vintner & Grower  
EST. 1858

2002 Merlot Napa Valley (\$40; includes 12% cabernet sauvignon, 6% cabernet franc and 4% petit verdot): Good ruby-red. Smoky aromas of black raspberry, plum, minerals, licorice, tar, game and truffle. Ripe, fine-grained flavors of dark fruits, smoke, tobacco and minerals. Dense on the front half but drier on the back end, finishing with a slight tart edge. Solidly structured. This varietally labeled merlot was replaced, beginning in 2003, with the Firebelle *cuvée*. 89. 2002 Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley (\$50): Good medium ruby. Blackcurrant, currant leaf, leather, smoke and tobacco on the nose. Sweet, dense and lush, with flavors of black raspberry, plum and mocha complicated by tobacco and currant leaf. This, too, finishes with a hint of tartness but possesses a bit more buffering mid-palate material. 90. 2002 Cabernet Sauvignon Solari Reserve Napa Valley (\$70; from the two oldest blocks, both about 20 years of age, on opposite sides of the property): Good deep ruby-red. Deep aromas of black plum, black raspberry, smoke, tar and game. Sweeter, creamier and lusher than the basic cabernet, with a finer-grained texture. Considerably riper on the back end, where the tannins are broad and fine-grained. This has lovely lift and verve. 92. 2003 Firebelle Proprietary Red Wine Napa Valley (\$40; 55% merlot, 30% cabernet sauvignon and 15% malbec): Good medium ruby. Sexy black raspberry and black licorice aromas. Fine-grained, spicy flavors of dark berries and licorice. Lively and harmonious in the mouth. Finishes with slightly dusty tannins but avoids the tartness shown by the 2002 merlot. Smith does not crush the berries, and he feels this has a lot to do with retaining brightness of fruit. 89-92. 2003 Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley (\$50): Ruby-red. Pure but subdued aromas of currant, leather and licorice. Fresh, spicy flavors of cassis, black cherry and licorice. A somewhat cooler style of cabernet with a note of tea leaf. Less thick than the 2002 but has density. Finishes with broad, dusty tannins and a lingering note of licorice. 89-92. 2003 LMV Salon Proprietary Red Wine Napa Valley (\$60; 60% cabernet sauvignon, 25% cabernet franc, 7% malbec, 4% petit verdot and 4% merlot, all from vines on loam over deep gravel, on the east side of the river): Good full ruby. Complex nose melds blackberry, leather, smoke and minerals, plus a hint of band-aid. Vibrant on the palate, with a deep, supple core of blackberry, black cherry and mineral flavors. Not hugely full or powerful but rather fine-grained. Finishes with supple, building tannins. 90-93. 2003 Cabernet Sauvignon Solari Reserve Napa Valley (\$70; the two blocks used to make this wine were co-fermented for the first time in 2003; 14.9% alcohol with a pH of 3.9): Good medium ruby. Varietally expressive aromas of *crème de cassis*, plum, smoke and tobacco. Dense, creamy and sweet, conveying an impression of small berries. The deep berry character is complicated by notes of smoke, truffle and earth. Comes across as more powerful and more gripping than the 2002, with big but ripe tannins. Still, I'd consume this wine over the medium term—say, within the next eight to ten years. 90-93.