

## **Larkmead Vineyards**

By Stephen Tanzer, May/June 09

Recent vintages from this historic property just south of Calistoga had performed consistently well in my peer-group tastings of Napa Valley wines, so I figured it was time for a visit. The multitasking Andy Smith, who is also responsible for superb chardonnays, pinot noirs and syrahs under the DuMol label, clearly has the touch for Bordeaux varieties as well. He came aboard here in 1999 and has helped owners Kate Solari Baker and Cam Baker expand their range of offerings from just a merlot and cabernet sauvignon back then (the varietal merlot bottling ended in 2002). Larkmead, whose history dates back to the late 19th century, has 150 acres planted on low-vigor valley floor soils (rock and loam with sand, silt and clay) and still sells off about 55% of its fruit. (Except for a tiny parcel of 115-year-old tocai friulano, the oldest (re-plantings here went in in 1992). The winery currently bottles about 10,000 cases, with the estate cabernet accounting for nearly half of this total. Incidentally, winemaker Smith was not the only person in the northern reaches of Napa Valley to tell me that the 2006 vintage here was a very successful one, albeit challenging. "We typically have a short growing season here, with a late flowering and early harvesting generally producing elegant wines," he told me. "So we tend to do especially well in the later vintages." The cabernet harvest didn't begin until October 10 in 2006 (or nearly three weeks later than that of 2007). Still, the low yields of 2007, a steady ripening process, and cool nights in August and September produced another very successful crop of wines, with alcohol levels actually a bit lower than those of 2006. "The '07s are bigger than the '06s, with softer fruit," said Smith. "They may also have a softer structure."

### **2006 Larkmead Firebelle Proprietary Red Wine Napa Valley**

(\$50; 55% merlot, 35% cabernet sauvignon, 6% cabernet franc and 4% malbec) Deep ruby-red. Currant, coffee, chocolate, iron and menthol on the nose. Lush and plump but sappy, with firm acidity framing the flavors of plum, black raspberry, mocha and tobacco. Nicely soft in the middle palate in spite of its firm acidity, finishing with very smooth tannins.

**91**

### **2006 Larkmead Cabernet Sauvignon Estate Napa Valley**

(\$55; this blend draws on blocks from all over the estate's large vineyard holdings; includes 3% merlot and 1% cabernet franc) Good full red-ruby. Enticing aromas of currant, chocolate, graphite, violet, loam and spices. Lush, suave and sweet, with a firm edge of acidity giving a tactile quality to the currant and graphite flavors. Less tight in the middle than the Firebelle, but tannic for this cuvee, and built to age.

**92**

### **2006 Larkmead LMV Salon Proprietary Red Wine Napa Valley**

(\$70; 62% cabernet sauvignon, 14% cabernet franc, 11% merlot, 11% malbec and 2% petit verdot; two-thirds new French oak) Good full medium ruby. Brooding aromas of cassis, licorice, graphite and minerals. Intensely flavored and quite elegant, with juicy dark berry and spice flavors complicated by mineral, stone and loamy elements. Ripe acids here contribute to an impression of roundness and breadth: this sweet, tactile blend really spreads over the palate. From three distinct soil types. Finishes with lovely persistence and lift.

**93**

### **2006 Larkmead Cabernet Sauvignon Solari Reserve Napa Valley**

(\$80; a selection of three blocks; 100% cabernet sauvignon) Good deep ruby-red. Brooding aromas of cassis, cedar, graphite and menthol. Suave and fine-grained on entry, and not quite as thick as the LMV Salon. The mid-palate shows a distinctly medicinal menthol quality and less easy sweetness than the LMV but a more serious structure and excellent lift. At once juicy and uncompromising, but then this is cabernet sauvignon. Finishes with solid tannins that call for several years of cellaring. My score today may turn out to be conservative. This has a higher pH than the LMV Salon (3.85, vs. 3.75) but is less pliant today.

**92+**

### **2006 Larkmead The Lark Proprietary Red Wine Napa Valley**

(\$125; 100% cabernet sauvignon from a single block in the middle of the property; the alcohol of 14.7% is the lowest of these 2006s) Saturated medium ruby. Superripe aromas of cassis, black plum and dark chocolate. Lush on entry, then tight in the middle, with the black fruit and licorice flavors currently under wraps. But here the tannins come off as suave and chocolately, as there's terrific buffering density of material. Very long on the aftertaste. Just four barrels were made, all new oak.

**94**

---

### **2007 Larkmead Firebelle Proprietary Red Wine Napa Valley**

Good red-ruby color. Lively aromas of currant, menthol, fresh herbs and tobacco, plus a whiff of pepper. Sweet and fine-grained, with lovely lift to the berry and graphite flavors; with its floral and herbal notes, this really dances on the palate. An intensely flavored wine with a light touch.

**90-92**

### **2007 Larkmead Cabernet Sauvignon Estate Napa Valley**

Good bright ruby-red. Black cherry, violet, menthol, coffee and mocha on the nose. Quite thick on the palate, even a bit youthfully monolithic, but with no shortage of energy. I find this clenched today and in need of further elevation. Finishes broad, classically dry and rather tannic. Hard to get a handle on today.

**89-92**

### **2007 Larkmead LMV Salon Proprietary Red Wine Napa Valley**

(60% cabernet sauvignon, 20% cabernet franc, 10% merlot, 5% malbec and 5% petit verdot) Dark red-ruby. Lovely violet lift to the aromas of currant, espresso and minerals; really showing its cabernet franc element today. Much sweeter and suppler at present than the estate cabernet, with a flavor of liquid lead pencil lifted by high-pitched minerals. Wonderfully lush and velvety wine, finishing with terrific palate-saturating breadth and silky tannins. Very sexy already.

**91-94**

### **2007 Larkmead Cabernet Sauvignon Solari Reserve Napa Valley**

(blended with 4% petit verdot) Bright ruby. Vibrant aromas of black cherry, violet, espresso and licorice pastille. More brooding and tighter-grained than the LMV Salon; clearly less evolved today. But there's exhilarating energy to the high-pitched flavors of black cherry, cassis, licorice and violet. A very rich wine with real verve. The rising, violet-tinged finish shows a varietally typical note of blackcurrant leaf without coming off as herbaceous. A classic Napa Valley cabernet in the making.

**92-95**

### **2007 Larkmead The Lark Proprietary Red Wine Napa Valley**

(includes 8% petit verdot) Saturated medium ruby. More roasted on the nose than the Solari Reserve, showing liqueur-like blackberry, blueberry and cassis aromas complicated by licorice, violet, mocha and graphite. Lush in texture but less showy than the Solari owing to an impression of firmer acidity and an almost syrah-like quality that apparently comes from the petit verdot component. This is almost liqueur-like without being at all overly sweet. Ultimately a suave and effortless wine, finishing with big tannins and a burst of licorice. Still, today I prefer the Solari Reserve for its harmony and perfume.

**91-93**