

Larkmead Vineyards

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Issue 150, May/Jun 2010

According to winemaker Andy Smith, afternoon temperatures at this property on Larkmead Lane south of Calistoga reached 100 degrees in 2008 every day from August 27 to September 7. Happily, even though the growing season tends to be abbreviated here—due in large part to early flowering—the harvest didn't start until September 13. Still, Smith describes 2008 as a short season, and the wines are forward and fruit-driven. The Larkmead 2007s have turned out fresh and suave. If they do not have quite the power of the uncommonly structured 2006s made here (Larkmead benefited from the much later harvest in '06), they will offer more early appeal.

2008 Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley

(\$30) Pale yellow. Aromas of lemon drop, grass and fresh herbs. Juicy flavors of greengage plum and cool lemon ice are lifted by floral and grassy nuances. Boasts lovely texture and sweetness, with a firm edge of acidity giving the wine shape and grip. Winemaker Andy Smith blocked the malolactic fermentation but did some lees stirring. I find this much more pliant and satisfying than the 2007. **90**

2007 Firebelle Proprietary Red Wine Napa Valley

(\$50; a blend of 62% merlot, 29% cabernet sauvignon and 9% malbec) Good deep ruby. Complex aromas of raspberry, redcurrant, tobacco and loam. Lush and sweet, with a silky, seamless texture to the plum and loam flavors. Finishes with broad, ripe tannins. **91**

2007 Cabernet Sauvignon Estate Napa Valley

(\$60; includes 3% merlot and 1% cabernet franc) Good full ruby. Pungent aromas of raspberry, currant, graphite, dried herbs, violet and loam, along with a whiff of dark tobacco; smells like a Graves. Less giving on the palate than the nose suggests, with a firm edge of acidity keeping the flavors under wraps today. Finishes with youthfully strict tannins. Winemaker Smith notes that he has not added either water or acid to any of the Larkmead reds since the 2004 vintage. **91(+?)**

2007 LMV Salon Proprietary Red Wine Napa Valley

(\$80; 62% cabernet sauvignon, 20% cabernet franc, 10% merlot, 5% malbec and 3% petit verdot) Deep ruby. Aromas of blackberry hard candy, licorice, violet, sage and minerals. At once opulent and perfumed, with lovely aromatic lift to the penetrating dark berry and bitter chocolate flavors. Solid structure nicely supported by excellent fruit intensity. Very fresh wine. **93**

2007 Cabernet Sauvignon Solari Napa Valley

(\$90; co-fermented with 10% petit verdot) Saturated medium ruby. Currant, violet, licorice and bitter chocolate on the nose and palate. Lush, sweet and spicy, with excellent breadth; this really spreads out to coat the palate. Compared to the LMV Salon, this shows more mineral and menthol notes on the back end, and yet the tannins are more suave. **92(+?)**

2007 Cabernet Sauvignon The Lark Napa Valley

(\$125; from a single block of cabernet sauvignon planted on the estate's rockiest soil; aged in 100% new oak) Good full medium ruby. The aromas of blackcurrant and bitter chocolate show a cool graphite minerality. Then almost surprisingly lush in the mouth, expanding impressively in the middle palate but enlivened by powerful minerality. Finishes very long, with huge, broad, fine-grained tannins. This is a major mouthful of cabernet. **94**

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2008 Firebelle Proprietary Red Wine Napa Valley

(\$60) Good medium ruby. Very ripe aromas of raspberry, tobacco, minerals and loam; more floral than the 2007. Then sweet and sexy in the mouth, with raspberry and currant flavors complicated by notes of violet and iron. Tannins are nicely buried in sweet fruit. **90-92**

2008 Cabernet Sauvignon Estate Napa Valley

(\$60; includes 7% cabernet franc and 4% petit verdot) Bright ruby. Good full medium ruby. Lively aromas of cassis and minerals. Sweet, ripe and easygoing if not yet particular complex. Very pure currant and dark raspberry fruit flavors are given sex appeal by a gravelly element. Finishes bright and sweet, with rather pliant tannins and a lingering note of chocolatey oak. **90-93**

2008 LMV Salon Proprietary Red Wine Napa Valley

(\$80; a blend of 55% cabernet sauvignon, 18% cabernet franc, 9% petit verdot, 9% merlot and 9% malbec) Good full ruby. Quite reticent on the nose, hinting at dark berries, licorice and dried herbs. Supple and plump but less expressive today than the estate cabernet, showing less easy sweetness. But this shows its class on the long finish, which features fine-grained and surprisingly sweet tannins. **91-93**

2008 Cabernet Sauvignon Solari Napa Valley

(\$90; includes 8% petit verdot) Dark ruby-red. Lovely lift to the aromas and flavors of blackberry, minerals and violet. Highly concentrated, chewy and sweet, with captivating inner-mouth lift and perfume to the superconcentrated flavors. Strong fruit is complicated by a mineral quality. A suave and seamless wine, finishing with plenty of ripe tannins and excellent grip. Winemaker Smith says the petit verdot adds the violet perfume and contributes acidity and tannins. **92-94**

2008 Cabernet Sauvignon The Lark Napa Valley

(\$125) Bright, deep ruby. Dark fruit aromas are currently dominated by sweet oak. Supple on entry, then quite tight and difficult to taste, with a strong bitter chocolate element overshadowing the wine's strong black fruit flavors. The least sweet of these 2008s today, and the most obviously tannic. This will need time to absorb its oak. **90-93**