November Tasting Report: California's Roaring 2021, Plus Striking Gold with Germany's 2022

James Suckling · December 12, 2023

jamessuckling.com (members' report)

Rebuilt from the publisher's members' page (printed December 2023): the report's introduction and its ten Senses notes for the Senses press archive; the text is unchanged, the layout is the house archive style.

Left: James tastes with Jasmine Hirsch. Right: three vintages of Tor's Black Magic.

Our ratings in November included a relative bonanza of perfect-scoring bottles – five from California and one from Germany – as we tasted more than 1,800 wines from 17 countries. Of the total, 518 came from Italy, 482 were from the United States and 340 were Australian offerings.

But it was California, specifically Napa and Sonoma, that gave the most bang for the buck. James was back in Northern California earlier than normal this year to test the quality of the 2021 vintage, and he found many exceptional wines from the year that may end up surpassing the 2018 and 2019 vintages in quality. This was especially true of pinot noirs, especially from Sonoma County. One that stood out was the Hirsch Vineyards Pinot Noir Sonoma County Sonoma Coast Raschen Ridge 2021, which James called "superlative at all levels, with fantastic precision and depth."

There were plenty of other pinot noirs as well as chardonnays from 2021 that James tasted along with winemakers from the West Sonoma Coast Vintners association (WSCV) These included offerings from Ernest Vineyards, Red Car, Flowers, Senses, Wayfarer, Freeman and Whistler, among others, The general consensus is that 2021, is all about structure, with impressive harmony to boot.

Senses in this report: 10 tasting notes

96 points – Senses Chardonnay Sonoma County Sonoma Coast B.A. Thieriot Vineyard 2021

› Flinty, Korean pear and lemon blossom aromas follow through to a medium to full body with fine tannins that spread across the wonderfully solid palate that goes on for minutes. So thoughtful and interesting. Very long and intense. Needs time to open. Best after 2025.

95 points – Senses Chardonnay Sonoma County Sonoma Coast Charles Heintz Vineyard 2021

› Dried apple and dried peaches with some ginger and spices. Full-bodied, with phenolic tension and layered texture. Chewy and very intense. Honeysuckle and honey. Flavorful finish. Unique. Drink or hold.

95 points – Senses Pinot Noir Sonoma County Russian River Valley Kanzler 2021

› Lots of iron and mineral character with iron and iodine. Black berry and strawberry. Medium to full body, salty, white pepper, cloves, and berry character. Flavorful finish. So much going on in the finish with plenty of spices. Drink or hold.

95 points – Senses Pinot Noir Sonoma County Russian River Valley MCM 88 2021

› Aromas of dark fruits with blonde tobacco and tar with some cloves and metal. Iron shavings. Medium body with linear and long tannins that run the length of the wine. White pepper and green cloves. Juicy finish. Better in two or three years. Try after 2025.

95 points – Senses Pinot Noir Sonoma County Sonoma Coast Day One 2021

› Aromas of iodine with ripe strawberries, fresh peaches and orange peel. Red fruits and dark cherries. Orange peel. Full but not overpowering. Creamy and layered on the finish. Fine tannins. Fresh at the end. Chewy yet refined. Drink after 2025.

94 points – Senses Chardonnay Sonoma County Russian River Valley 2021

› A crunchy and layered white with sliced pear and apple with some hints of vanilla character. Medium to full body. Fresh and vivid. Flinty and firm at the end. Drink now or hold.

94 points – Senses Chardonnay Sonoma County Russian River Valley UV – El Diablo Vineyard 2021

› This is really crisp and crunchy with sliced apple, oyster shell and fresh flowers. Full-bodied. Apple tart, dried lemons and crushed stone. Some citrus blossom. Crisp at the end. Drink or hold.

94 points – Senses Chardonnay Sonoma County Sonoma Coast Tenth Stop 2021

› Aromas of flint and dried lemons with some lemon blossom. Pear tart, too. Full-bodied with a firmness and beauty as well as minerality and linear length. Steely and vivid. This is one for the cellar. Drink or hold.

94 points – Senses Pinot Noir Sonoma County West Sonoma Coast Bodega Thieriot 2021

› This is first leaf Calera clone with lavender, dark strawberry and gunpowder aromas that follow to a medium body, with fine tannins that are well-integrated and end with orange peel and dark berries. Some iron. Bright and flavorful. Nicely crafted and polished. Drink or hold.

92 points – Senses Pinot Noir Sonoma County Russian River Valley 2021

› Plenty of dried fruit with oyster mushroom and savory character on both the nose and palate. Some tar. Medium to full body. Solid and chewy. Some smoke and earth. Tannin driven. Drink or hold.