

Noted French winemaker releases spectacular Napa/Lake County reds

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Always up for a challenge, France's Stéphane Derenoncourt has shifted his focus to Napa Valley grapes.

A self-made man who launched his enological career in a vineyard in Fronsac, Derenoncourt was so impressed with the wines he tasted up on Spring Mountain a few years ago that he's now launched a Napa Valley wine project.

His success in France — as well in more recent years in Spain, the Middle East and Asia — speaks to a belief in sustainable farming and as little intervention as possible in the fermentation and aging cellars. At present, Derenoncourt is in great demand, consulting for some 60 winemaking operations around the world.

He first offered his services as a consultant in 1997, and in 1999 started his own consultancy company, Vignerons Consultants. Derenoncourt and his team now work with a growing list of estates in Bordeaux and elsewhere, including Château Pavie-Macquin, Château Canon-la-Gaffelière, Clos Fourtet, Château Smith Haut Lafitte, Château Brown and Château Prieuré-Lichine.

In June 2008, Derenoncourt and Vignerons Consultants were hired by Francis Ford Coppola to assist with winemaking projects at Rubicon Estate Winery. Other Derenoncourt projects abroad include contracts in Turkey, China, Syria (Domaine de Bargylus), India and with Château Marsyas in Beqaa Valley, Lebanon.

With two decades of wine crafting under his belt, Derenoncourt longed to make his own wines in the New World. During a recent visit here, the terroir expert and renowned winemaker launched

his latest effort, Derenoncourt California Wines.

The soft-spoken son of a Normandy steel worker said he came to California because he wanted “to produce cool-climate, site- specific Napa wines with an uncompromising approach.”

His objective, as well as that of his hands-on local assistant, H  l  ne Mingot, is to consistently craft distinctive, terroir-driven wines that exhibit freshness, balance and a pleasing palate.

“I’m a drinker, not a taster,” the 46-year-old Dunkirk native said as he sipped one of the five wines he’s just introduced to the market.

Derenoncourt and Mingot are involved in every aspect of the project, from selecting the best grapes from choice cool climate vineyards to racking and bottling the wines. He says these are the first “grapes-to-bottle” wines he’s made in this country.

The first releases are from the 2006 harvest — a cabernet sauvignon and a cabernet franc from Caldwell Vineyard in Coombsville, a merlot from Atlas Peak’s Stagecoach Vineyard, a syrah from Hudson Vineyard in Carneros and a Lake County cabernet sauvignon from Red Hills Vineyard.

As with the Nickel & Nickel project of Gil and Beth Nickel and partners launched more than a decade ago, these are single-vineyard wines that best express the distinct personality of each vineyard.

We tasted all five of the limited production wines in a salon at Auberge du Soleil the other day and, in a word, they are spectacular. Here’s a few thoughts:

Derenoncourt 2006 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$220, 100 cases): Seems like the Caldwells have been growing exceptional fruit in Coombsville for a long time — as far back as the early vintages of Jason Pahlmeyer’s wines, if memory serves. Well, the Caldwells still do and along came Derenoncourt to sniff out some low yielding old vines in Block 13 for this “dark, brooding” cab. It’s a glass full of sweet blackberries spiced up with a bit of black pepper and a splash of tarragon and rosemary on the finish. A lush, unfiltered cabernet with a marked balance of ripe fruit, mature tannins and bright acidity. It’s a keeper.

Derenoncourt 2006 Napa Valley Cabernet Franc (\$140, 100 cases): Black cherries dominate on both nose and palate in this exquisite expression of Coombsville fruit. Typical of the variety, this is a wine with intense inky hue and blooming violet aroma. Mature tannins are balanced with ripe fruit and refreshing acidity. While this varietal often reminds us of just picked raspberries, there’s very little of that here. Perhaps it’s the well-drained clay soil and the 30-year-old vines that give this one its distinct bouquet and palate. The winemaker says it’s his favorite and, I’d have to agree. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever tasted a better Napa Valley cabernet franc.

Derenoncourt 2006 Napa Valley Merlot (\$140, 100 cases): This is a top shelf merlot, one with considerable pedigree. Harvested from a vineyard with volcanic soils nearly 2,000 feet up Atlas Peak, the grapes from Stagecoach have come together in a juicy wine that tastes of both black plums and red cherries. The winemaking team says it best in noting that the wine sports “a piercing fragrance of ripe red fruit that leaps from the glass, laced with light mulling spices and caramelized aromas.” It’s a lush wine with a beguilingly long finish.

Derenoncourt 2006 Napa Valley Syrah (\$60, 600 cases): An exceptionally aromatic syrah from the legendary Carneros vineyards of Lee Hudson. Hudson’s another one of the Napa Valley sustainable purists who sing to and sleep with their vines. Here’s a lush, floral, concentrated syrah that almost tiptoes across the palate, depositing sweet, peppery fruit and departing with a long-lasting blueberry/cherry finish. A muscular syrah with plenty of backbone, so it should age as well as it drinks now.

Derenoncourt 2006 Lake Country Cabernet Sauvignon (\$40, 575 cases): Harvested from the mineral rich volcanic soils of Andy Beckstoffer’s 56-acre red Hills Vineyard, the exceptional fruit for this outstanding cabernet clearly demonstrates that Lake County has a lot going for it. It may not have the cachet of the Napa Valley, but this Lake County site has provided the winemakers with quality cabernet sauvignon. The initial splash of red fruit reminds one of cranberries, followed up with a lingering taste of black cherries and currants. Well balanced and chock full of ripe fruit, this is a delicious ruby red cab that’s ideal for quaffing as well as pairing with grilled fowl and meats. It’s as attractive a cab as the one that costs five times as much.

Unfortunately, Derenoncourt’s reputation precedes him. With only 100 cases each, the Napa Valley cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc and merlot have been gobbled up by collectors and restaurateurs. The wines are being made at Arkenstone Vineyards in Angwin.

Derenoncourt California Wines are produced in partnership with Montesquieu Wines, a southern California-based importer and winery in the Burgundian negociant tradition owned and operated by Fonda Hopkins. Hopkins and her staff are busy placing the five wines on lists and retail shelves throughout California and in select U.S. markets.

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