

Derenoncourt in America

30 Jul 2010 by Linda Murphy

[Stéphane Derenoncourt](#), the St-Émilien-based, globe-trotting winemaking consultant, has finally landed in California, not only as an advisor to Francis Ford Coppola at Rubicon Estate in Napa Valley, but also with his own brand, Derenoncourt California.

Derenoncourt, who consults for more than 60 properties in seven countries, began working with Rubicon in 2009, yet laid the foundation for his own California label in 2006, purchasing grapes from vineyards in Napa Valley and Lake County. The resulting five wines were released earlier this year.

The wines are produced in small quantities, between 100 and 600 cases each, and range in price from \$40 for a Lake County Cabernet Sauvignon to \$220 for a Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon. While not all the wines suit my personal taste, they are exceptionally well made and taste truly Californian, with optimum ripeness, intensity and power, yet with polished, supple tannins and mineral notes. There is also an admirable freshness to these wines, even though they are so very concentrated. Whether Derenoncourt and his Napa-based winemaker, Loire Valley native Hélène Mingot, achieve this vibrancy naturally or with acidification, I don't know, but if it's the latter, it's not apparent.

The alcohols are shockingly high, between 15.4% and 15.8%, although I didn't detect any heat on the palate with any of them. With the exception of the Lake County Cabernet Sauvignon, the wines are seriously priced, even for the neighborhood: \$220 for the Napa Cabernet, \$140 each for the Merlot and Cabernet Franc, and \$60 for the Syrah.

The wines come from specific vineyards, although the labels don't reflect this. The Napa Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc are from the Caldwell Vineyard, in the cool (for Napa Valley) Coombsville region northeast of the city of Napa. The Merlot grapes were purchased from the Stagecoach Vineyard on Atlas Peak (at 1,968-foot elevation), the Syrah from Lee Hudson's vineyard in Napa Carneros. The Syrah includes 15% Merlot - a most unusual marriage.

All five wines are unfinned and unfiltered, and for all but the Syrah, whole clusters were punched down rather than being crushed -- no doubt contributing to the suppleness of the wines.

Derenoncourt has a toehold in another American state, Virginia, where he consults for Boxwood Winery in Middleburg. He says Cabernet Franc is the grape with the most potential in cool, wet Virginia, and is working to make Boxwood a model for expert viticultural and winemaking practices.

Derenoncourt California Cabernet Sauvignon 2006 Napa Valley 17 Drink 2011-2021 (?)

Despite the alcohol (15.8%), the wine is remarkably balanced, even elegant. Subtle aromas of loam, Asian spice, vanillin and black cherry. Full-bodied and dense, with a warm, coating mouthfeel and satiny tannins. Very crisp acidity provides a burst of closing freshness. I suspect it has a high pH, and am therefore decidedly uncertain as to the optimum drinking window. (LM)
\$220

Derenoncourt California, Red Hills Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon 2006 Lake County 17 Drink 2010-2017

Minerality defines the complex nose, with vanilla, cassis, cedar and forest floor. The fruit is sweet and ripe, with volcanic minerals carrying through on the palate. Mouth-coating tannins and vibrant acidity. No palate heat, despite 15.7% alc. Good value. (LM)
\$40

Derenoncourt California Cabernet Franc 2006 Napa Valley 17.5 Drink 2011-2020

Dark chocolate and graphite lead the nose, then the palate turns energetic and fresh. Complex layers of cassis, tobacco leaf, dried herbs and oak spice, with Derenoncourt California's signature soft tannins. Firm acidity and striking minerality. 15.8% alc. (LM)
\$140

Derenoncourt California Merlot 2006 Napa Valley 16.5 Drink 2010-2016

Plush and juicy, with well-ripened, concentrated black cherry and plum fruit, hints of bittersweet chocolate and minerals, and a rather caressing texture. This is the one wine I thought could benefit from more acidity, though many Americans equate Merlot with softness. 15.5% alc (LM)
\$140

Derenoncourt California Syrah 2006 Napa Valley 16 Drink 2010-2016

Rich, meaty and leathery, with concentrated berry and black cherry fruit, floral notes and spice. Velvety tannins are almost too soft; begs for more structure. 15% Merlot. 15.4% alc (LM)
\$60