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## Developing a winemaker's palate

by Ray and Eleanor Heald

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Winemaker Matt Smith carries the title Director of Winemaking at Kendall-Jackson Estates. He is responsible for all wines produced in a claret (Bordeaux shaped) bottle which include sauvignon blanc, cabernet sauvignon, merlot, zinfandel, and red wine blends – enormous responsibility for a 44-year-old who at the beginning of this century was perfecting his French language skills!

Smith was raised in Grosse Pointe Park, Michigan. He earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1990 from the University of Michigan with majors in French Language and Political Science. He spent an undergraduate year abroad at the Université de la Sorbonne in Paris, France and worked as a tour guide.

Eleven years later (2001), after traveling the world and eventually working in California, Smith became acquainted with a winemaker and decided he too wanted to make wine. That's when he enrolled in a graduate program for Viticulture and Enology at UC Davis. After earning his degree in 2003, his passion for travel took him first to Burgundy, where he worked in the cellars at Maison Joseph Drouhin, then on to Australia, working as assistant winemaker for Mitchelton Wines in the Province of Victoria.

These winemaking experiences helped Smith develop his palate, passion and expertise to start his California winemaking career at Kendall-Jackson in 2004. He applies small lot fermentation techniques, learned at Joseph Drouhin, when fermenting Bordeaux-style wines at Kendall-Jackson. From his Burgundy experience he also learned the importance of tasting each fermentation tank every single day. He explains that the taste helps him to guide the progress of each tank during fermentation.

Currently, Smith works with grapes grown in K-J's mountain vineyards in Napa and Sonoma Counties. We tasted some wines with Smith at The Reserve in Birmingham.

**2010 Kendall-Jackson Avant Chardonnay** \$30, is minimally oaked in an effort to appeal to consumers seeking a fresh, fruit-driven chardonnay rather than a buttery, barrel fermented wine. It is 54 percent stainless steel fermented and 46 percent fermented in neutral oak barrels to preserve its pure fruit flavors of crisp lime and green apple.

**2009 Kendall-Jackson Grand Reserve Sauvignon Blanc** \$37, produced from grapes grown in a single vineyard in Mendocino County overlooking the Russian River. The wine presents a unique minerality with a touch of grass and green pea in balance with guava and mango.

**2009 Kendall-Jackson Grand Reserve Chardonnay** \$37, from fruit grown in Santa Barbara and Monterey Counties. It represents the top three percent of K-J's quality tier. "Over time we have identified those vineyard parcels that earn the right to be in the Grand Reserve," Smith explains. The juice from selected aromatic clones is fermented in 30 percent new French oak, stirred on the fine yeast lees every week to broaden the palate impression.

**2009 Kendall-Jackson Grand Reserve Merlot** \$46, is produced from four high elevation vineyards located in Sonoma County, Bennett Valley, Los Carneros, and Napa's Howell Mountain. This 100 percent merlot has defined structure and firm tannins that set it apart from most merlots.

**2007 Kendall-Jackson Highland Estates Hawkeye Mountain Cabernet Sauvignon** \$52. The Highland Estates wines showcase fruit grown on mountains, ridges, hillsides and benchlands in cool coastal California vineyards and is all about terroir. The Hawkeye Mountain vineyard reaches elevations of 900-2,200 feet above sea level. The shallow, rocky soils reduce vine vigor and berry size, which enhance flavor concentration and color depth. Aged 20 months in 65 percent new French oak barrels, the wine shows deep black cherry, cassis and red currant flavors.

### **Best wines to ease into autumn**

Apple notes make **chardonnay** appealing in autumn.

2010 Franciscan Napa Valley Chardonnay \$19 – value!

2010 Frei Brothers Russian River Valley \$20 – green apple flavors

2011 Morgan Metallico \$21 - unoaked

2010 Wild Horse Unbridled \$24 – minerally

2010 J. Lohr Arroyo Vista \$25 – rich

2010 William Hill Napa Valley \$25 – oaky

2009 Rock Wall Reserve \$35 – toasty oak

2010 Franciscan Cuvée Sauvage \$40 – top tier

2010 Chalk Hill Estate \$48 – full, generous, powerful yet elegant

It's an "r" month. Think oysters with **sauvignon blanc**.

2011 Dry Creek \$16

2011 Gary Farrell \$25

Think out of the box.

2011 Big House White \$10 (blend of aromatic whites)

2010 Prelius Vermentino \$15

Most versatile **pinot noir**.

2010 Bogle \$11

2010 Clifford Bay \$15

2010 Kendall-Jackson Vintner's Reserve \$19

2009 Wente Reliz Creek \$25

2008 MacRostie Wildcat Mountain \$40

2009 La Rochelle Dutton Ranch \$48

Tantalizing reds – flavorful with barbecued meats.

2010 Lost Angel Cabernet Sauvignon \$10 – real deal

2010 Ravenswood Napa County Old Vine Zinfandel \$16

2009 Nozzole Chianti Classico \$20

2008 Nozzole Chianti Classico Riserva \$24

2008 Dry Creek Cabernet Sauvignon \$25

2009 Dry Creek Old Vine Zinfandel \$30

*Eleanor & Ray Heald have contributed to numerous international publications including the Quarterly Review of Wines. Contact them by e-mail at [focusonwine@aol.com](mailto:focusonwine@aol.com).*