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THE CALIFORNIA ISSUE

The State's
Signature
**White
Wines**



Sauvignon Blanc

The Vibrant Vanguard

When Robin Lail launched her brand, Lail Vineyards, in 1995, it was with Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon in mind. She hired Bordeaux-trained wunderkind Philippe Melka as her winemaker.

But at winemaker dinners, Lail felt she should have a white wine to welcome guests and start the meal. She often served some from her favorite neighbors like Spottswode Winery and Araujo Estate Wines.

Before long, Lail wanted a Sauvignon Blanc of her own.

"When we started, Sauvignon Blanc was the ugly stepsister," she says. "Nobody thought much about it. It has been an evolution."

She asked Melka if he knew how to make a white wine. Melka, who had completed an internship at Château Haut-Brion, which is an iconic estate for white Bordeaux, accepted the challenge.

The two would create a Graves-style Sauvignon Blanc from the Napa Valley called Georgia. First released in 2002, the wine made a strong impression. From a dry-farmed, estate vineyard in Yountville, the selection is fermented and aged entirely in new French oak.

"No one was doing it," she says. "It was initially met with some animosity because it was priced at a higher level. Then it became something people followed."

By 2007, Lail began to make a second Sauvignon Blanc called Blueprint. It was intended for earlier release and a broader market, with less new French oak.

"I love this variety," she says. "It has so much to bring to the table. I love the differentiation. There's no proper way to make Sauvignon Blanc. It's just meant to sing its own song."

Sauvignon Blanc was first planted in California in the Livermore Valley in the 19th century. Across the state, there are nearly 15,000 acres devoted to it, which makes Sauvignon Blanc the fourth-most planted white after Chardonnay, Colombard (which is primarily used for bulk white-wine blends or distillation) and Pinot Gris/Grigio.

Even with all that Cabernet, Napa Valley is home to the most Sauvignon Blanc in the state, at 2,715 acres, according to 2017 USDA figures. Though there's pressure to plant Cabernet Sauvignon over all other varieties, Lail is enthused to see others in Napa Valley aim for a high bar. For her part,

Lail has continued to invest in the variety, including recently T-budding a Merlot vineyard over to Sauvignon Blanc.

Sonoma County is next in Sauvignon Blanc plantings at 2,611 acres. Dry Creek Valley remains its strongest advocate, and wineries like Dry Creek Vineyard and Quivira Vineyards have become household names.

Lake County is another significant player, with a little more than 2,000 acres under vine.

Across regions and producers, the grape takes on an array of styles that liken to other regions, from New Zealand to France's Loire Valley or Bordeaux.

Kathy Joseph, winemaker and proprietor of Fiddlehead Cellars and Fiddlestix Vineyard, moved to Santa Barbara County in 1989 with the goal to make great Sauvignon Blanc.

"Santa Ynez Valley has this unique east-west orientation, with water to the west and the south," says Joseph. "Inland areas that are warm by day are predictably cool at night as the fog rolls in over the mountains.

"Hence, it is a magnificent district for Bordeaux varieties. Our Sauvignon Blanc is non-herbaceous with great natural acidity, and we can be successful with a range of styles."

Joseph makes three bottlings: a "sassy" all-stainless-steel, New World style she calls Goosebury; one called Happy Canyon that has moderate midpalate weight and good, Loire-like minerality; and a Bordeaux-style called Hunnysuckle that has more weight, but is still lean and savory.

She doesn't think the variety always gets the respect it deserves.

"I believe the press doesn't rate it as a wine with elegance and grace, and uses a different scale than it might for Chardonnay or imports," she says.

Pam Starr, owner/winemaker of Crocker & Starr Wines in the Napa Valley, takes the long view.

"The demand for Sauvignon Blanc has always been ebb and flow," says Starr. "Consumers seem to relate to value pricing with regards to other countries and expectation of specific acid profiles. When it comes to premium Napa, the consumer needs to know that the producer is consistently trustworthy with the flavor profile. The price seems to be less important than having confidence in the producer."

—*Virginie Boone*

93 Lail 2017 Blueprint Sauvignon Blanc (Napa Valley). A fleshy, boldly structured white. Lemon rind, wet stone, peach and a grittiness of background oak mingle effortlessly within a moderate richness of balanced complexity. —V.B.

abv: 14.3% **Price:** \$40

