



LARKMEAD VINEYARDS: SINGLE SITE, MULTIPLE TERROIRS

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Napa Valley had a rich wine history long before Prohibition, and three of the most celebrated wineries from that bygone era – Inglenook, Beaulieu Vineyards and Beringer – are still famous today.

Family-owned Larkmead in Calistoga is a fourth, founded 125 years ago, but, jokes winemaker Dan Petroski, ‘It’s the one you’ve never heard of.’

Larkmead’s modern story began about 20 years ago, and it’s now making some of Napa’s top Cabernets and getting some serious recognition. So when Petroski invited me to a vertical tasting of six vintages of The Lark – the winery’s top Cabernet – that he was staging for collectors before the big-spend Napa wine auction, I emailed back: ‘Yes!’

On the warm summer day, bees were buzzing in the garden around the porch of the sleek, chic white farmhouse and winery designed by architect Howard Backen. The setting is idyllic: you look out on vineyards that stretch across the valley floor from Highway 29 on the west nearly to Silverado Trail on the east.

‘The soils,’ says Petroski, ‘are very diverse. They’re like a snapshot of the whole Napa Valley.’

Before the official tasting, he lined up three early vintages of The Lark and a couple of bottles of Solari, a Cabernet made from the estate’s oldest vines, for me to sample in the bright and airy farmhouse.

HISTORY

Cam and Kate Solari Baker, the owners, dropped by to reveal amusing tidbits about the winery’s history, which starts with the first owner, colourful Firebelle Lil, who drank bourbon, smoked cigars, and came up with the name Larkmead.



The Salmina family, originally from Switzerland, leased the winery in 1895 (purchasing it in 1903) and boosted the estate to a grand business. In 1948, Kate's parents purchased the property and built a new winery long before vines covered the valley and tourists arrived in their Ferraris.

Since 1992, Kate and her husband Cam have been in charge of the estate. They carefully replanted the vineyards in the 1990s, and in 2006 built a new winery equipped with enough tanks to match the number of vineyard blocks. Larkmead also boasts lovely hospitality spaces like the one in which this tasting was held.

THE WINES

Reds, especially Cabernet, are at the heart of Larkmead's eight-wine portfolio, which includes two whites – one of them a stunner made from Tocai Friulano vines that are over 100 years old.

But this is Napa, so the three top-tier reserve Cabernets from three distinct terroirs are where Larkmead is making its reputation.

The 2001 Solari was the first special cuvee, and since 2007 the wine has come from a single parcel of vines planted on clay and gravel soils.

The Lark started life with the 2006 vintage, a selection of the best barrels, but in 2012 it began morphing into a vineyard designate and by the 2013 vintage it came solely from a sandy, Bale loam parcel planted in 1998 to a single Cabernet clone, 337.

A third Cabernet wine, not tasted this time, is Dr Olmo, which comes from a gravelly parcel and debuted with the 2013 vintage.

A SHIFT IN STYLE



Comparing The Lark 2006, 2007 and 2009 with Solari 2010 and 2011, then later sipping The Lark 2012 through to 2017 at a long table with a group of enthusiastic collectors was fascinating. The final wine, The Lark Ascending 2017, is a barrel sample. Made since 2013, it's only offered at Auction Napa Valley and Napa's trade barrel auction, Premiere.

Larkmead used to make wines with rustic tannins and texture, and what struck me most was the shift in style between the earlier and more recent vintages, where the individual terroirs show through.

Though the parcels are practically next to one another, Solari is bigger, richer and more muscular, while The Lark is more rounded and refined, sexy and seamless. The standout vintages of The Lark for me were 2014, 2015 and 2016, which showed more elegance, complexity and freshness, along with silkier textures.

Part of that is surely down to Petroski, named San Francisco Chronicle's 2017 Winemaker of the Year. Petroski began as cellar master at Larkmead in 2006, under experienced winemaker Andy Smith, and when he took over in 2012, he gradually began picking at lower sugars and dialling back the oak and extraction to tame the tannins.

Since 2015, the vineyard has been farmed 100% organically, but most important has been Petroski's focus on specific plots. In that, he's following the Napa zeitgeist:

The Lark is from a small parcel of Cabernet Sauvignon vines – exclusively the 337 clone – on deep, rich Bale loam that's surrounded by more gravelly soil. The Lark Ascending is produced from the slower-ripening west side of The Lark parcel.

Solari is from a site just 200 metres from The Lark's parcel, but is on gravelly, heavy clay.

Both Solari and The Lark are wines for lovers of California Cabernet that will age and age. The prices – \$250 and \$350, respectively – put them deep in collector territory, but I'd happily splurge on The Lark 2016.



VINTAGE	NAME	TASTING NOTES	SCORE
2017	The Lark	2017 will long be remembered for the horrific fires that devastated parts of the Napa Valley in October. Not only were wineries and homes completely destroyed, many winemakers had not finished picking and their grapes were affected by smoke taint. The other issue was heat spikes early in the season and again in September that stressed the vines. Petroski made only 130 cases of The Lark, less than half the amount he'd made the year before. Yet this barrel sample is a long, intense and brooding wine, with racy sweet fruit and savoury herbal notes. Drinking Window 2024 - 2038	93
2016	The Lark	This is a rockstar vintage for Napa Cabernets. Cool weather in August prolonged the growing season and harvest, which translated into intense, deep wines that have expansive aromas, seductive textures and soft tannins. The Lark illustrates how much Petroski has evolved the style to one of freshness, purity and focus, driven by its distinctive terroir. Layers of aromas range from damp earth and tobacco to lavender and subtle dried herbs. Flavours of dense dark berries and minerals are joined on the palate by smooth, polished tannins, good acidity and a long finish—you won't want to spit this wine out. What stands out is its authoritative structure. This won't be released until 2020. Drinking Window 2023 - 2044	97
2015	The Lark	2015 was a brutally hot drought year with more than 20 days over 100°F, including during harvest. It has produced both stunning, voluptuous wines and not so good ones from sunburned grapes. At Larkmead, yields were down about 20% and the style of The Lark took another leap to more complexity, finer tannins and a longer finish. The aromas are more perfumed with violets and cassis, while the flavours are deeper, purer and more red-toned, with a distinctive briary and mineral element that's rustic in a good way. The structure is more linear and refined. Drinking Window 2022 - 2040	96
2014	The Lark	The third year of drought had a warm growing season with no heat spikes. The result was an abundant crop and suave, silky-textured wines with excellent acidity and energy but less power and structure than in 2013. Expect The Lark to be ready sooner. The layered aromas include cassis, graphite, cocoa, spice and bright fruit. My overall take is a purer, more transparent and lifted wine than in previous vintages, as though Petroski was just beginning to hit his stride with this cuvee. The wine is lighter in colour than other vintages, with clear cassis notes and dark, very mineral flavours, along with a more elegant, polished texture. Drinking Window 2021 - 2035	95
2013	The Lark	The year was touted as a great vintage for structured Cabernets in Napa, and The Lark has the kind of density and brooding power found in top examples. 2013 was the year winemaker Dan Petroski shifted the wine from a barrel selection to a vineyard designate. The wine comes from a small parcel of vines on Bale loam that's surrounded by more gravelly soil. The vines are exclusively the 337 clone, which makes denser, more fruit-forward wines with a floral character. This is exceptionally aromatic, balanced and savoury, with an almost juicy element to its pure fruit and cedary flavours. You can see Petroski's philosophy in the tannins, which are less rustic and more refined. Drinking Window 2021 - 2045	95



VINTAGE	NAME	TASTING NOTES	SCORE
2012	The Lark	After a hiatus during 2010 and 2011, The Lark was back in 2012 - this was the vintage where Petroski began shifting it to a vineyard designate wine, a process that was finalised in 2013. 2012 was a warm vintage that produced a lot of soft, almost mushy mid-weight wines whose quality hasn't measured up to the early hype. Yet some producers made brilliant Cabernets that are open and seductive, and The Lark falls into the latter camp. It's intense, bright and berryish, almost juicy, with chalky tannins and a softer, more luxurious texture than earlier vintages. Wisely, it was aged in less new oak. Production was 290 cases, three-times the amount made in earlier years. Drinking Window 2019 - 2035	94
2009	The Lark	The best of the three early vintages I tried is all blackberry and blueberry fruit with smoky mineral-and-liquorice flavours and silky-smooth tannins. It shows more freshness, brightness, and complexity than earlier examples, which may be due to the cool vintage, though 2009 was not as cold as 2010 or 2011. Summer and early fall brought no extreme heat events, but there was heavy rain in mid-October. Like the previous two vintages, this was aged in 100% new French oak barrels. Drinking Window 2019 - 2034	93
2007	The Lark	At first, this vintage was thought of as one of Napa's best for Cabernet because of its textbook growing season. Most wines showed a plush richness even in the barrel, but later many of them seemed monolithic, postcards for Napa's sometimes over-the-top Cabernets. The Lark has more refinement than many of them, with an edge of rusticity. Though it's powerful, dark and savoury - a classic Napa Cab with pure, heady fruit - it also has good acidity and drive. It belongs to what Dan Petroski, who became winemaker in 2012, refers to as The Lark's George Foreman phase. There are only 23 bottles left! Drinking Window 2019 - 2032	92
2006	The Lark	This is the first vintage of The Lark, one of the winery's limited-production Cabernets, with only 88 cases produced. It started as a selection of the best barrels in the cellar, with the idea that it would only be made in top vintages. This one is a big flavour, high impact wine. Inky, dense, plush and ripe, it's very Napa sunshine in style, with a bit of spice but also thick body and a touch of rusticity, and you can still feel the alcohol and tremendous tannins. Drinking Window 2019 - 2030	91
2017	The Lark Ascending	Since 2013, Larkmead has been offering this special cuvee as their auction lot at the annual Napa Premiere barrel auction and at Auction Napa Valley. It comes from one part of the same parcel of vines whose grapes go into The Lark. The east side of the parcel makes more tannic wines, while grapes from the west side, with a richer soil profile, make softer, plusher, more elegant ones. While the Lark is a blend of the two, The Lark Ascending comes only from the west side, where the grapes ripen more slowly. Tasted from barrel, the 2017 is deep, dark and rich with a more voluptuous finish than the same vintage of The Lark. The 2016 was better. Drinking Window 2022 - 2040	93



VINTAGE	NAME	TASTING NOTES	SCORE
2011	Solari	Only one barrel of 2011 Solari was made, and it was never released - hardly surprising considering that 2011 was the most difficult vintage in decades. There was rain at the beginning of the growing season, followed by a cold, damp summer that encouraged botrytis, and foggy, damp harvest conditions. Yields were low and serious sorting was essential. Larkmead picked after a second rainfall and opted not to produce any of their top cuvees. That said, the 2011 I tasted was dark and intense, with bright herbal notes and an incredible linear structure. Which just goes to show that terroir wins out. Drinking Window 2019 - 2038	95
2010	Solari	The first vintage of Solari was 2001, and since 2007 it has been made from the estate's oldest vines in a parcel located only 200 metres from The Lark, but with different soils, and aged in 100% new French oak. 2010 was one of Napa's longest and coldest growing seasons in decades - although 2011 was colder - with a heatwave at the end. Yields were low and grapes that usually go into The Lark were included in this Solari. It's a huge, dense wine yet balanced and seamless, with rich, plump blackberry fruit and an almost citrussy acidity. Drinking Window 2019 - 2035	94