To Kalon: Napa’s First-Growth Vineyard
A side-by-side tasting of four acclaimed Cabernets highlights what is special about this site

MaryAnn Worobiec
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"One of the things that brings us all together in this room is that we all love great wines," pointed out vintner Mark Carter during a Wine Experience seminar devoted to Napa Valley's historic To Kalon vineyard. "Great wines come from great vineyards," Carter added, "and To Kalon is one of the greatest vineyards in the world."

The seminar provided rare insight into the vineyard's character, along with a preview of not-yet-released 2012 vintage bottlings. Wine lovers had the opportunity to taste four highly sought-after Napa Cabernet Sauvignons—each sourced from different blocks in the site—from Paul Hobbs Winery, Tor Kenward Family Wines, Carter Cellars and Schrader Cellars. Wine Spectator senior editor James Laube said he typically describes To Kalon Cabernets as "opulent."

Winemaker Paul Hobbs said that To Kalon vineyard was first planted by Hamilton Crabb in 1868 in what is now the Oakville appellation, which Hobbs called the "filet" of Napa. To Kalon's ownership is currently split primarily between grower Andy Beckstoffer, who owns 89 acres and from whom all the panelists purchase grapes, and Robert Mondavi Winery. Hobbs noted that the vineyard has well-draining soils and is kept cool in the afternoon shadows of the Yountville Hills, which preserves the acidity and fruit flavors.

For Tor Kenward, what makes To Kalon special is the clonal diversity. "This is very important to the To Kalon story," he said, "Different clones of the same grape give you this 'spice box.'" The varying Cabernet clones planted by Beckstoffer in 1994 after buying the site—4, 6, 7, and 337—all look different and taste different, Kenward elaborated.

Vintner Fred Schrader described 337 as "fat," 4 as the "backbone" and the rarely planted 6 as having berries that are so small they look like buckshot. Schrader's MM XII bottling, nicknamed "Old Sparky," is a blend of the best barrels of those three Cabernet clones, though Schrader also bottles the clones separately. "If an American vineyard were ever given the title of 'first-growth,' To Kalon would be in first place," he asserted.

"What really impressed me when we got to To Kalon was the farming," added Carter. "It was the first time I saw farming where they would take the crop down to one and two clusters per shoot." Thinning the crop, Carter said, ensures the ripeness of the grapes, allowing for a long hang time and giving vintners the ability to choose when they
want to harvest.

For all the different elements the vintners could cite, Hobbs pointed out that there is simply something magical about To Kalon. He admitted, "It's a mystery why it's so great."

The Wines Poured

Note: None of the wines were released at the time of the event, so scores and prices were not available. Click on the names for a history of their reviews of To Kalon bottlings.

- Paul Hobbs Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard 2012
- Tor Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard 2012
- Carter Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard The Grand Daddy 2012
- Schrader Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard MM XII 2012 ("Old Sparky"), from magnum