

Hanzell

V I N E Y A R D S

As seen in December 2006 issue of:



Hanzell 2003 Ambassador's 1953 Vineyard Chardonnay (Sonoma Valley)

95 If there ever was a single wine that embraced the heritage of a vineyard in California tracing its lineage of the few surviving vines back to Burgundy in the 1800s and is isolated as a monopole, it is the small 4 acre block planted by Ambassador Zellerbach in 1953 with provenance from To-Kalon (1953), Chalone (1946), Martin Ray (1943), Paul Masson (1890) and originally Burgundy. It is important to note that only in exceptional vintages this block is kept separate. I tasted recently with winemaker Michael Terrien at the winery and he noted the bottle had been opened 4 hours previously. The supply is incredibly limited, typically released to only the best restaurants in America with brutally tight allocation. It took extraordinary effort from everyone involved to bring this wine to Vinfolio. We reserve the right to limit.

Aromas of buttered blueberry, black cherry stones with rich slate and earth elements. Picks up some bright citrus, developing floral (rose) and mineral hints in nose. The palate is smooth with integrated cherry, plum and graphite. There is an ethereal "weight" here; tough to quantify except possibly attribute to the age of the vines and the corresponding miniscule yield. Call it communing with an "old soul." A long 30 second finish is found. A miniscule amount is available. Pinot for the purist.

Hanzell has been at the front of Burgundy varietal production in California taking up the vanguard with Stony Hill and Schoolhouse in the 1950s as the most traditional standard bearers of the "grail" while the rest of California experienced the miserable lot of what passed for Pinot Noir and Pinot Chardonnay for the better part of a generation. That they all survived and still flourish as destinations for the loyally devoted stems mainly from that they are all relatively small, privately owned or directed by those who literally grew up in the winery.

Some have had significant obstacles to overcome with family members continuing the legacy of departed founders. If my memory serves me, none experienced the PR nightmare faced by Hanzell in 2003 when they discovered significant issues with tainted wines from the 2000 and 2001 vintage traced to a contaminated floor drain. Many don't know that Hanzell embarked on constructing a brand new facility following that episode and have brought in Michael Terrien to succeed Bob Sessions who nobody thought would ever retire. If you have crossed them off your list, that's fine, because they are not for everyone. Their devotion to quality is the foundation to the Hanzell philosophy on wine, joined by the understanding that these wines are not intended for the "catch and release" drinker who wants instant gratification rather needing several years of aging to fully integrate. My personal experience with 2001 Chardonnay from Hanzell showed no detectable taint. Several dozen Vinfolio customers have Hanzell wines in their collections going all the way back to the 1956 vintage. They must know something..