

CALIFORNIA

CABERNETS & BLENDS

98 Harlan Estate 2003 Red Wine (Napa Valley); \$265. Another spectacular Harlan hits the market. It shows the earthy quality that marks wines off the estate, with an aroma suggesting a warm bale of hay under the summer sun, a sweet straw and bay laurel scent that adds savory richness to the cherry, blackberry and chocolate flavors. As usual, the tannins are virtual perfection, at once sweet and firm, dense and fine, perfectly in balance with all the fruit and new oak. So young now, a fat little baby of a wine that's irresistible, but will hold and improve well beyond its tenth birthday. —S.H.

96 Bond 2003 Vecina (Napa Valley); \$230. From a vineyard just adjacent to the Oakville estate comes this wonderfully earth-scented wine. Deep and brooding, the aromas bring to mind a walk through a forest. Now a whiff of bay laurel, then pine cone and a rich, mulchy humus, and hovering over all are ripe blackberries and oodles of caramelized new oak. Much more open at this point in its life than the '02, but should live for many years. —S.H.

96 Bond 2003 St. Eden (Napa Valley); \$230. Tasted alongside the Melbury, St. Eden is richer, more layered and complex. The jammy cherry and chocolate flavors here possess deeper notes of blue and purple fruits, with a brooding, mulchy depth that grounds the wine. The texture is gorgeous, with perfectly ripe, sweet tannins. Despite the wine's power, it has an airy, cloud-like quality, surely the mark of a great wine. —S.H.

96 The Maiden 2003 Red Wine (Napa Valley); \$110. This second label of Harlan Estate comes from the estate vineyard, and shares much in common with the main wine, which is a bit more focused and concentrated. The similarities include the briary, wild herb scents of sage and thyme that complex the ripe red cherry pie filling fruit, cocoa, cola and licorice. As with the main wine, the tannins here are gorgeous. This is a balanced, harmonious wine that combines power and elegance. —S.H.

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94 Bond 2003 Melbury (Napa Valley); \$230. Fairly high in alcohol, this sumptuous red wine is almost sweet in fudgy, macaroon, cherry pie filling and chocolate truffle flavors, with a candied opulence all the way through. Yet it's dry. The 100% new oak adds to the caramelly, meringue taste. Elegant and voluptuous, it's an unabashed beauty, firmly in the Harlan style. —S.H.

90 Bond 2003 Pluribus (Napa Valley); \$230. From Spring Mountain, a new Bond single-vineyard bottling. It's a big wine, a bit obvious and, for me, the least of the current batch. It's so big it's almost cumbersome, and lacks the breed and elegance of its sister wines. Toasty caramel overpowers, while the wine is as gooey-sweet as melted chocolate. It's a controversial wine, made from very young vines. Could be an ager. —S.H.