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Surprising Middle-Aged Californians

Given the relative youth of most California wineries, compared with their Old World counterparts, it's hard to make generalizations about ageability. But I recently encountered two middle-aged California wines that really pleasantly surprised me. At a restaurant in the Turks and Caicos I encountered a 1995 Domaine Carneros La Rêve Blanc de Blanc, a sparkler from the California winery owned by Taittinger. I was intrigued, and at \$70 it was cheaper than any of the actual Champagnes on the list, so I jumped. The wine was amazingly fresh, and lively—much fruitier and slightly sweeter than any of the Champagnes would have been, which probably made it work better with the fish curry.

A few nights later at the Breslin Bar in New York, the super-ebullient sommelier Carla Rzeszewski talked me into trying the 1997 Kalin Cellars Sauvignon Blanc. Sounded implausible, but I have learned to trust Carla and I have had some fine Kalins in the past. In fact this eccentric Marin County winery is known for very late releases—they should recycle Orson Welles's "we will sell no wine before its time" ad for Paul Masson. Amazingly enough, 1997 is the current release for the Sauvignon Blanc. Unlike the Taittinger this wine acted its age, which is to say it was incredibly complex and deep, with mellow oxidative character and a bit of an orange tint. I seem to recall orange marmalade coming to mind. Most of all it reminded me of the white wines of López de Heredia, the great Spanish Rioja maker, which also specializes in later releases. It was powerful enough to stand up to April Bloomfield's oxtail soup as well as her vinegar poussin. Don't know what Bono and Bill Clinton were drinking that night—Fergus Henderson was sipping whiskey—but if they were smart they listened to Carla.

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