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Blankiet: Proprietary Red 1999-2012

Rumor has it that in early 1996 if Christian Moueix had known that the property just above his Dominus Estate on the west side of Yountville was available for purchase, he would surely have snapped it up. It turns out the story was not apocryphal. In a perfect case of preparation meeting opportunity, Claude Blankiet got there first. Blankiet, a native Burgundian who was in the textile business in Texas at the time, had been searching for prime vineyard land in the western hills above Yountville for three years. “Then one day our real estate broker told us that he had secured a 24-hour hold for us to look at some land, which was essentially three knolls. We flew from Texas on a rainy January day in 1996, walked the land, and signed a contract on the spot.”

Blankiet named the property Paradise Hills Vineyard, explaining that Christian Moueix had often told the press that the central avenue of his Napanook vineyard was the gateway to paradise. He and his wife Katherine planted their first vineyard that year to a Cabernet Sauvignon clone that came from Lafite-Rothschild. Blankiet met winemaker Helen Turley and her husband John Wetlaufer in 1997, after having become one of the earliest clients for their Marcassin wines, and together they decided to bring in star viticulturalist David Abreu to plant additional acreage in '97, '98 and '99.



Mutimedia: [A conversation with Claude Blankiet](#)

Blankiet’s three hillocks feature different soil types, all of volcanic origin, while the acreage below his winery is alluvial soil from erosion off the mountain. Roughly two-thirds of the vineyard acreage faces east, and most of the rest, including the best block of Cabernet Sauvignon, faces southeast or south.

Blankiet's maiden 1999 release, made by Turley, was 100% Cabernet Sauvignon from the 1996 planting. The wine was aged in 100% new heavy-toast Taransaud *barrisques*, but by 2003 and 2004 Turley had started mixing in some medium-toast barrels. More recently, Blankiet has reduced the percentage of Taransaud barrels in his flagship Cabernet to about 70%, adding barrels from other coopers like Ermitage, Boutes and Jarnac (located in Cognac). And the percentage of new oak is now typically 90% or 95% and may go lower in the future, especially for Blankiet's top Merlot-based blend, the Rive Droite.



Blankiet's Medieval-inspired castle perched atop Paradise Hills

While no new vineyards have been planted since 1999 (there are now 16 acres under vine), some vines have been regrafted—for example, in 2007 a section of Merlot was changed over to Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot, and in 2012 another block of Merlot was grafted over to Cabernet Sauvignon. “We now have Merlot where it should be,” noted Blankiet, “in cooler spots with more clay in the soil.” Today about 65% of the acreage is Cabernet Sauvignon and 25% is Merlot. The rest is Petit Verdot and Cabernet Franc.

Blankiet has worked with three very talented winemakers since the outset, as well as one world-famous enologist. Helen Turley vinified through 2005, then Martha McClellan, who also serves as winemaker at Sloan Estate, made the 2006 through 2008 vintages, with enologist Michel Rolland serving in an advisory role. The 2009 was made by then-assistant winemaker Max Duimstra and Rolland. Denis Malbec, who also makes the wines for Kapcsándy Family Winery, took over in February of 2010.



Block 1 Cabernet Sauvignon

This March I had the privilege of tasting a vertical of Blankiet's top red wine (100% Cabernet Sauvignon through vintage 2005 and thereafter labeled Proprietary Red to reflect the growing role of Merlot), in the company of Claude and Katherine Blankiet and Denis and May-Britt Malbec. Although it was a consistently spectacular line-up, my favorites were the most recent vintages, which I found to be Blankiet's most complete wines made to date, showing greater harmony in the early going and nobler tannins than most earlier vintages. (The 2010 was one of the top dozen bottles of California Cabernet I've yet tasted.) "We have learned from experience," noted Claude Blankiet. "It has taken us years and years of trying different things to get the true expression of the site, which was always our goal."

Vine stress was a problem in some early vintages, as it continues to be for many Napa Valley growers. Following the loss of a sizable portion of his Cabernet Sauvignon grapes to dehydration in 2003, Blankiet installed misting machines in the vineyards and began to use shade cloth; he credits these improvements with saving the 2004 vintage, which also featured serious heat spikes t the end of August and again in early September.



The winery, as seen coming down from the castle

But in more recent vintages, he has made little use of the misting machines, due in large part to improvements in grape-growing. Denis Malbec has overseen significant changes in the vineyards, beginning with a new philosophy on managing the leaves. For starters, today more leaves are left above the clusters to protect the fruit against hot direct sun. “Now we can wait longer to pick,” noted Malbec, “and we don’t necessarily get more sugar in the grapes because they are not dehydrating.” The profile of the vines is different today: “Previously there were fewer clusters and leaves, but the grapes were very exposed to the sun.” Thus the misting machines have virtually been retired, and the use of shade cloth is normally limited to a handful of rows that are particularly exposed.

Malbec is also more meticulous today when it comes to irrigation. While he does not use more total water than previously, he waters more frequently, in smaller doses, to prevent stress that would interfere with the ripening of the tannins. Malbec also extracts earlier in the vinification, before much of the sugar has been transformed to alcohol, so as to avoid getting harsh tannins. His goal is to make wines with “acidity, energy, minerality and soft tannins.” He typically adds some Petit Verdot at the end of the blending process, to bring a bit more focus to the wine, as well as to add “a touch of graphite minerality, and notes of iron, blood and iodine.” Not surprisingly, the wines from recent vintages have shown slightly lower alcohol levels and slightly higher acidity than the earlier bottlings.



A glorious spring afternoon at the estate

Malbec and Blankiet are very much in sync on the style of wine they are looking for, though as Blankiet points out, achieving that style is a challenge. “It’s more difficult for us to make wines that are approachable young but are capable of aging,” he said. “We prefer to make wines that have an immediate balance and immediate perfume, wines that are voluptuous right away but without excess. I don’t necessarily want to make wines that will take 10 or 15 years to be drinkable.

Malbec does a *cuvaison* lasting 5 or 6 weeks, including 4 to 7 days of pre-fermentation cold soak and 10 to 20 days of post-fermentation maceration. The wines are racked as needed, and Malbec does a lot of stirring of the fine lees. Bottling takes place in late August or September.



A stunning collection of magnums

In contrast to the other vertical tastings I was part of in March, at Blankiet I tasted all of the wines in magnums, as Claude Blankiet was out of stock on a few of the early vintages and did not trust his 1999 bottles, which had spent time in his cellar in Texas. Certainly the magnums I tasted were all full of life, but I should emphasize that the recommended drinking windows I have provided in my tasting notes are for these magnums, which age significantly more slowly than regular 750-milliliter bottles.

[See all the wines \(in chronological order\)](#)

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Blankiet Estate 2012 Mythicus Cabernet Sauvignon Paradise Hills Vineyard Napa Valley

Yountville, Napa Valley

Red wine from United States

Drinking window: 2024 - 2044

- (100% Cabernet Sauvignon): Bright ruby-red. Knockout Cabernet nose combines currant, licorice menthol and wild herbs; brooding but not overly dark. Utterly seamless and glossy on the palate yet at the same time sharply delineated, with outstanding floral lift to the dark berry and bitter chocolate flavors. For all its early sex appeal and noble tannins, this wonderfully sappy, extremely long wine is very backward today and in need of extended aging. An addition to the range, the Mythicus is a new 100% Cabernet Sauvignon bottling that debuts in 2012.
- **Stephen Tanzer. Tasting date: March 2015**

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- **Blankiet Estate 2012 Proprietary Red Paradise Hills Vineyard Napa Valley**

Yountville, Napa Valley

Red wine from United States

Drinking window: 2020 - 2038

- (81% Cabernet Sauvignon): Deep red with ruby highlights. High-pitched perfume of black and red berries, licorice, violet, mocha and coffee. Began savory, mineral and dry but became more generous and pliant as it opened in the glass, showing lovely mid-palate weight and richness and complementary sweet oak. Most impressive today on the back end, which features powerful, late-arriving, fine-grained tannins and slowly building, inexorable length. I suspect that this wonderfully plush, silky wine will require seven or eight years in bottle to display the backbone that's currently hidden by baby fat, but it will also be accessible on the early side.
- **Stephen Tanzer. Tasting date: March 2015**

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- **Blankiet Estate 2011 Proprietary Red Paradise Hills Vineyard Napa Valley**

Yountville, Napa Valley

Red wine from United States

Drinking window: 2020 - 2030

- (81% Cabernet Sauvignon): Very pure, lively aromas of blackberry, black cherry, licorice pastile, bitter chocolate and violet, accented by a peppery quality. Smooth, dry and classic but in a distinctly cooler style than the 2010, showing licorice and fresh herb notes and good chewy extract. Here the fine-grained tannins are a bit more obvious as there's less supporting mid-palate stuffing, but there's nothing green or underripe about this very well-balanced cool-year wine.
- **Stephen Tanzer. Tasting date: March 2015**

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- **Blankiet Estate 2010 Proprietary Red Paradise Hills Vineyard Napa Valley**

Yountville, Napa Valley

Red wine from United States

Drinking window: 2024 - 2040

- (84% Cabernet Sauvignon): Healthy, bright ruby-red. Multidimensional nose offers scents of blackcurrant, blackberry, brown spices and graphite minerality accented by herbs and pepper. At once plush and sharply focused, showing lovely reserve and energy to its dark fruit, mineral and soil flavors. I find this to be downright Pauillac-like. Finishes with strong but fine-grained late-arriving tannins and outstanding slowly building length. A great Cabernet-based wine that's already remarkably complex and elegant but has a glorious future ahead of it. As Blankiet did not deleaf the vines, the fruit was not burned by the heat spikes in late August and September in this essentially cool year. I tasted this magnum four days later and it was even better. One of the finest and most complete California Cabernets I've tasted in recent years.
- **Stephen Tanzer. Tasting date: March 2015**

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96 pts

- **Blankiet Estate 2009 Proprietary Red Paradise Hills Vineyard Napa Valley**

Yountville, Napa Valley

Red wine from United States

Drinking window: 2018 - 2030

- (82% Cabernet Sauvignon): Good deep red-ruby. Captivating aromas of cassis, plum, mocha, smoke and wild herbs. Plush and seamless on the palate, with an element of soil-driven salinity complicating the rich fruit flavors of red and blackcurrant, mulberry and plum. In a warmer style at 14.9% alcohol but with so much mid-palate stuffing that it does not come off as alcoholic. The building tannins are sweet and even, allowing the wine's fruit to linger. A spectacular result for 2009: wonderfully harmonious, ripe and long.
- **Stephen Tanzer. Tasting date: March 2015**

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94 pts

- **Blankiet Estate 2008 Proprietary Red Paradise Hills Vineyard Napa Valley**

Yountville, Napa Valley

Red wine from United States

Drinking window: 2016 - 2027

- (15.2% alcohol; 82.5% Cabernet Sauvignon): Deep red with ruby highlights. Aromas of black cherry, cassis, licorice, wild herbs and menthol. At once savory and sweet, displaying lovely inner-mouth floral character to its dark berry, mineral and cedar flavors. This seamless, juicy wine finishes very subtle and long, with firm tannins and excellent length. Beginning with this vintage, Blankiet stopped using heavy-toast barrels. This "fire-and-ice" vintage produced the only vintage of the Blankiet flagship wine to surpass 15% alcohol. Denis Malbec, who took over winemaking duties here in February of 2010, put together the final blend.
- **Stephen Tanzer. Tasting date: March 2015**

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- **Blankiet Estate 2007 Proprietary Red Paradise Hills Vineyard Napa Valley**

Yountville, Napa Valley

Red wine from United States

Drinking window: 2016 - 2025

- (60% Cabernet Sauvignon and 40% Merlot): Deep red with a dark core. Slightly high-toned aromas of raspberry liqueur, wild herbs and white fruits. Massive, thick and sweet, with the fruit syrup quality continuing through the palate. Most noteworthy today for its sheer volume and voluptuous texture. But this hugely tannic, mouth-expanding wine also shows surprising balance and an absence of rough edges.
- **Stephen Tanzer. Tasting date: March 2015**

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93+ pts

- **Blankiet Estate 2006 Proprietary Red Paradise Hills Vineyard Napa Valley**

Yountville, Napa Valley

Red wine from United States

Drinking window: 2023 - 2033

- (60% Cabernet Sauvignon and 40% Merlot): Good dark red, but less deep at the core than the 2005. Plum, game, cocoa, mocha, tobacco and a whiff of leather on the nose; less fruity than the 2005. Fat, silky and sweet, conveying an impression of energetic extraction. A very deep, opulent style but with cool hints of mint and pepper too. Finishes with slightly gritty tannins that are not yet ready for prime time. Quite Graves-like and in need of patience. This was the first vintage in which Blankiet's top red wine did not say Cabernet Sauvignon on the label.
- **Stephen Tanzer. Tasting date: March 2015**

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93+ pts

- **Blankiet Estate 2005 Cabernet Sauvignon Paradise Hills Vineyard Napa Valley**

Yountville, Napa Valley

Red wine from United States

Drinking window: 2018 - 2026

- (100% Cabernet Sauvignon, like all of the earlier vintages): Deep ruby-red. Distinctly cooler on the nose than the 2004, offering scented aromas of blackberry, violet, bitter chocolate, tobacco and wild herbs, along with a hint of hay and a citrus high note. Surprisingly dense and creamy on entry, then firm acidity and underlying minerality give shape to the rather wild flavors of black fruits, herbs and violet. Can't match the opulence or depth of the 2004 but this initially slightly rigid wine opened nicely with air. Made from a large crop; Michel Rolland was responsible for the final blend.
- **Stephen Tanzer. Tasting date: March 2015**

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95 pts

- **Blankiet Estate 2004 Cabernet Sauvignon Paradise Hills Vineyard Napa Valley**

Yountville, Napa Valley

Red wine from United States

Drinking window: 2022 - 2032

- Bright, deep red with ruby tones. Very sexy aromas of cassis, black plum, licorice and toffee, with a ripe citrus note adding another dimension. Densely packed, seamless and energetic, showing outstanding intensity and power to its dark fruit flavors. It was hot for a long time in 2004, noted Blankiet but this wine boasts terrific balance and huge but fully integrated tannins. The suggestion of lemon oil carries through onto the palate. Outstanding. This is the vintage with the highest pH (5.03) and lowest acidity (5.0 grams per liter) of the range, but the Cabernet vines benefited by being picked after a sharp heat spike at the beginning of September (the estate's Merlot was picked in hotter conditions).
- **Stephen Tanzer. Tasting date: March 2015**

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93 pts

- **Blankiet Estate 2003 Cabernet Sauvignon Paradise Hills Vineyard Napa Valley**

Yountville, Napa Valley

Red wine from United States

Drinking window: 2020 - 2030

- Good deep red with a dark core. High-pitched aromas of cassis, blackberry, minerals, flowers, licorice and leather are a bit less fruity than those of the 2002. Juicy and suave in the mouth, with penetrating acidity giving the wine excellent vibrancy for its vintage. Finishes with huge, mouth-saturating tannins that still need time. "But this wine in 750-milliliter bottles is ready to drink," noted Claude Blankiet.
- **Stephen Tanzer. Tasting date: March 2015**

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94+ pts

- **Blankiet Estate 2002 Cabernet Sauvignon Paradise Hills Vineyard Napa Valley**

Yountville, Napa Valley

Red wine from United States

Drinking window: 2020 - 2032

- Good deep red with a solid core. Some superripe notes to the aromas of dark berries, violet, licorice, espresso, fresh herbs and exotic white fruits. Superconcentrated and opulent, with a liqueur-like quality but also surprising juicy lift, minerality and savory complexity for a wine with a pH of 4.0 and the lowest acidity of all these vintages. This, too, is still a baby, although the wine's major palate-saturating tannins are ripe and even. I'd hold it for even more complexity.
- Stephen Tanzer. Tasting date: March 2015

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93+ pts

- **Blankiet Estate 2001 Cabernet Sauvignon Paradise Hills Vineyard Napa Valley**

Yountville, Napa Valley

Red wine from United States

Drinking window: 2020 - 2030

- Deep, saturated red with a dark core. Slightly reduced nose opened with air to reveal vibrant notes of dark berries, violet, game, licorice, lilac and menthol. Still extremely backward, showing a penetrating quality and terrific cut and lift, with the dark fruit, spice and licorice flavors complemented by toasty oak. A step up in body and length from the 2000 but these tannins too still call for some patience.
- Stephen Tanzer. Tasting date: March 2015

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92+ pts

- **Blankiet Estate 2000 Cabernet Sauvignon Paradise Hills Vineyard Napa Valley**

Yountville, Napa Valley

Red wine from United States

Drinking window: 2018 - 2027

- Bright, dark red. Darker on the nose than the 1999, offering scents of cassis, violet, camphor and licorice pastille. Much less evolved than the 1999, showing penetrating acidity and rather powerful alcohol to its dark berry and licorice flavors. This very impressive if slightly unrefined wine still needs some time for its gripping tannins to harmonize with its fruit. But there's plenty of energy to keep the wine alive.
- **Stephen Tanzer. Tasting date: March 2015**

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92 pts

- **Blankiet Estate 1999 Cabernet Sauvignon Paradise Hills Vineyard Napa Valley**

Yountville, Napa Valley

Red wine from United States

Drinking window: 2015 - 2021

- (100% Cabernet Sauvignon): Healthy full red. Rich aromas of plum, raspberry, camphor, wild herbs and spices, plus hints of violet and lilac. Juicy and spicy on the palate, with harmonious acidity framing the flavors of red fruits, flowers and cedar. Concentrated for a wine from young vines but not particularly deep; this has just enough mid-palate stuffing to support its tannins. I'd drink this over the next several years.
- **Stephen Tanzer. Tasting date: March 2015**

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