

WINE REVIEWS

Stephen Tanzer - International Wine Cellar

May/June 2008

2006 Arietta H Block Hudson Vineyards Red Wine Napa Valley, 91-94 points

(\$150; a 60/40 blend of cabernet franc and merlot, co-fermented) Good deep ruby. Black raspberry, mocha and menthol on the nose. Sweet, creamy and densely packed, with rather wild flavors of raspberry, mocha, game and tobacco. Structured, backward wine with terrific length. The building tannins show full ripeness.

2005 Arietta Variation One Red Wine Napa Valley, 93-95 points

(\$100; 55% syrah and 45% merlot) Wild aromas of mocha, graphite and game, with a complicating note of roasted nuts. Sweet, plush and seamless, but with excellent energy to the layered black fruit flavors. This comes across as remarkably vibrant for a wine with a pH of 3.9. Finishes with building but very fine tannins and excellent length.

2006 Arietta Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley, 92-95 points

(\$125; 96% cabernet sauvignon and 4% petite verdot) Deep blue-tinged ruby. High-pitched aromas of cassis, blackberry, violet, menthol and mint. At once juicy and smooth, with intense black fruit flavors supported by a firm structural underpinning. Finishes long, fresh and youthfully medicinal, with fine tannins arriving late and coating the teeth. Elegant and strong.

2006 Arietta Quartet Red Wine Napa Valley, 91-93 points

(\$85; a new wine that includes 45% cabernet sauvignon, 26% cabernet franc, 22% merlot and 7% petit verdot) Full ruby-red. Blueberry, violet and mint on the nose. Juicy, fresh and vibrant, with firm acidity and solid tannic backbone giving it very good flavor definition. Today, this is the least fleshy of these young 2006s, with the result that the tannins come across as more dusty. A bit oaky on the back end too. From David Abreu's vineyard on top of Howell mountain, plus some cabernet franc from Hudson vineyard.

2006 Arietta Merlot Hudson Vineyard Napa Valley, 91-94 points

(\$75) Good full ruby-red. Captivating aromas of black raspberry, smoked meat, bitter chocolate and minerals. Lush, sweet and seamless, with a deep core of raspberry and chocolate flavor firmed by minerality and complicated by a saline nuance. Deep, sexy, chewy wine, finishing with building tannins and excellent length. Merlot with real personality.

2005 Arietta H Block Hudson Vineyards Red Wine Napa Valley, 94 points

(\$150) Good deep ruby-red. Captivating aromas of black raspberry, mocha, minerals, milk chocolate and nutty oak, lifted by sexy spices. Rich, luscious and creamy, with terrific weight in the mouth. Wonderfully supple and mouthcoating wine with smooth, sweet tannins and excellent persistence. This wine is based on 80% cabernet franc, the highest percentage since Arietta's outstanding 1997 red blend, which was indistinguishable from a topnotch St. Emilion when I last tasted it a year ago.

2005 Arietta Variation One Red Wine Napa Valley, 92(+?)

(\$100; a 70/30 blend of syrah and merlot) Good deep ruby-red. Knockout wild nose combines black fruits, violet, mocha, bacon fat and game. Silky on entry, then less obviously sweet in the middle palate than the young 2006, with an insidious intensity to its smoked meat and mocha flavors. Finishes with building tannins. This is rich but in an awkward stage today.

2005 Arietta Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley, 92(+?)

(\$125; a blend of 76% cabernet sauvignon, 18% cab franc and 6% petit verdot) Deep ruby-red. Aromatic nose features cassis, licorice, bitter chocolate and spices. Lush, rich and stuffed with fruit, but with underlying minerality and harmonious acidity giving life to the middle palate. Intriguing floral and dried sage notes add complexity. A solidly built midweight with some youthfully firm tannins that reach the front teeth. The 2006 may have more tannins and sheer size but this wine is also in need of patience.

2006 Arietta On the White Keys White Wine California, 93 points

(\$65; 85% sauvignon blanc from Sonoma Mountain and 15% semillon from Hyde Vineyard in Carneros) Medium

yellow. Pungent aromas of lemon, pineapple, fresh herbs, honey and hay, with a hint of lanolin. Then pure, dry and zesty in the mouth, with mouthwatering flavors of orange peel, stone fruits, hazelnut and spices framed by bright acidity. Very fresh and harmonious white wine, not to mention long on the aftertaste.

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2005 Arietta H Block Hudson Vineyards Red Wine Napa Valley, 92-95 points

(A 67/33 blend of cabernet franc and merlot) Bright ruby. Cassis, licorice and violet on the nose. Silky and noble on entry, then penetrating, intense and sharply defined, offering an uncanny combination of opulence, power and cut. Captivating violet and dark chocolate notes. Finishes with big, broad tannins, superb spine and building length.

2005 Arietta Variation One Red Wine Napa Valley, 92-95 points

(A blend of 70% syrah and 30% merlot) Good deep ruby. Very ripe, syrah-dominated aromas of black fruits, chocolate and meat. Lush, thick and sweet, with an opulence of texture leavened by the wine's serious tannic clout. Kongsgaard describes this as a "reverse blend" (it usually has more merlot than syrah), and mentioned the Hermitage lieu-dit Les Bessards as a comparison. He describes 2005 as "a great syrah year." This compellingly deep, chewy wine offers outstanding potential.

2005 Arietta Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley, 91-93 points

(75% cabernet sauvignon, 21% cabernet franc and 4% petit verdot, from the Thorvilos and Lucia Abreu vineyards on Howell Mountain) Bright ruby-red. Expressive nose melds currant, blackberry, licorice pastille and chocolatey oak, hinting at an almost medicinal character. Suave on entry, then sweet, thick and pliant in the middle palate, with superb concentration and richness supported by a powerful spine of ripe tannins. This boasts compelling sweetness and a texture of velvet without going over the top, thanks in large part to the natural freshness of the vintage.

2005 Arietta On the White Keys White Wine California, 94 points

(Two-thirds sauvignon blanc from Sonoma Mountain and one-third semillon from Hyde Vineyard, all barrel-fermented) Bright pale yellow. Complex, vibrant nose melds lemon drop, fresh fig, minerals and crushed stone. Large-scaled but sharply delineated, with a strong rocky character to the citrus, spice and mineral flavors. Today the wine's semillon side dominates, but the unctuous texture of this superconcentrated white blend is nicely lifted by the sauvignon blanc element. Finishes with superb energy and length. (Incidentally, Fritz Hatton bought out his long-time partner John Kongsgaard last year; Kongsgaard vinified the '05s and Andy Erickson, who also makes Screaming Eagle and was recently appointed winemaker at Dalla Valle, took over winemaking responsibilities for Arietta before the 2006 harvest.)

May/June 2006

2004 Arietta H Block Hudson Vineyards, 93-95 points

(A 60/40 blend of cabernet franc and merlot) Bright ruby-red. Perfumed aromas of black raspberry, smoked meat, dark chocolate and brown sugar. Superconcentrated, sweet and spicy, with a captivating sugar/acid balance. The violet and cassis flavors are complemented by deep, nuanced soil tones. A compellingly sweet, silky blend with outstanding breadth and opulence. Finishes with building, ripe tannins and great persistence. This amazingly expressive wine seems ready to bottle.

2004 Arietta Variation One, 92-95 points

(60% merlot and 40% syrah, co-fermented; the fruit is destemmed but not crushed) Deep, bright ruby-red. Slightly reduced nose blossomed quickly to show black raspberry, dark cherry, mocha and chocolate. Lush and superripe on the palate, but saline and mineral elements as well as the wine's strong acid/tannin spine give it great definition and grip. Firm tannins are buffered by the wine's strong material.

2004 Arietta Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley, 92-94 points

(Thorevilos cabernet sauvignon with 15% cabernet franc and 5% merlot from Hudson Vineyard) Full ruby-red. High-toned but quite closed on the nose. Then chewy, dense and sweet in the mouth, with highly concentrated, sappy black raspberry flavor and compelling vibrancy. Offers a rare combination of silky texture, outstanding breadth and bright acidity. As ripe as this is, there's no hint of raisins. The high-toned character carries through on the long, ripe aftertaste.

2003 Arietta H Block Hudson Vineyards, 92 (+?) points

Good full ruby-red. Brooding, pure aromas of black fruits, licorice and shoe polish; this smells like young, austere Bordeaux. Then slightly reduced and tightly wound in the mouth and currently dominated by its powerful structure. There are intense black fruits here, but the wine is in an awkward stage today, with the tannins currently dominating. Almost certainly better than it's showing: I'd wait at least three or four years before pulling the cork.

2003 Arietta Variation One, 95 points

Medium ruby. The nose is at once cool and exotic, with expressive, explosive aromas of black cherry, raspberry, smoked meat, iris and brown spices. Wonderfully sweet and dense in the mouth, saturating every square millimeter of the palate. A magical combination of syrah energy and merlot breadth. Finishes horizontal and with great persistence, with a strong element of baking spices. A great California red blend.

2003 Arietta Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley, 93 points

Deep ruby-red. Sappy black cherry, roast coffee, tobacco, mocha and brown spices on the nose. Densely packed and suave, with fruit so sweet that one could easily enjoy this wine right now. Wonderfully lush, layered cabernet, finishing with very fine, building tannins.

May/June 2005

2003 Arietta H Block Hudson Vineyards, 94-96 points

A 60/40 blend of cabernet franc and merlot. Ruby-red. Cool but ripe aromas of blackberry, blueberry, cassis and licorice. Wonderfully thick and dense but with superb life in the mouth. Compelling flavors of black fruits, with inner-palate floral lift. This is even lusher than the 2002. John Kongsgaard has figured out how to do something that too few California winemakers can do: make extraordinarily rich, layered wines that maintain vibrancy. A great showing today.

2003 Arietta Variation One, 93-95 points

A 60/40 blend of merlot and syrah, co-fermented. Good saturated ruby-red. Nose offers a compelling combination of syrah and merlot perfume: black raspberry, minerals, licorice, flowers. Dense and thick, but with terrific flavor definition and lift and captivating notes of flowers and graphite. A powerfully structured wine that finishes with explosive fruits and minerals and great persistence. Incidentally, this syrah comes from a different block of the Hudson Vineyard than the syrah that goes into Kongsgaard's own syrah bottling. This is a hotter site that produces more full-blown wine, Kongsgaard explains. One of those rare 1+1=3 wines, where the whole is more than the sum of the parts. Obviously, the blend works.

2003 Arietta Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley, 92-94 points

Includes 15% merlot and 5% cabernet franc. Good bright ruby. Knockout nose combines black cherry, blackberry, licorice and bitter chocolate. Wonderfully sweet and concentrated, with snappy fruit flavors and perfectly integrated acidity. Can't quite match the complexity of the H Block blend, but this boasts terrific fruit and underlying sweetness. Finishes with broad, dusty tannins. Mostly from the Thorvilos Vineyard, on the lower reaches of Howell Mountain. Will make a worthy new entry to the Arietta line-up.

2002 Arietta H Block Hudson Vineyards, 95 points

Good full ruby-red. Deep, highly complex nose combines blackberry, black cherry, violet, minerals, nuts and smoky oak. A wonderfully rich wine that offers great mouth coverage but maintains real zing, thanks to its mineral freshness and firm tannic spine. The pHs for this cuvee are routinely in the 3.8 to 3.9 range, notes Kongsgaard, but the wine always tastes fresher. Finishes very long and lively, with big, chewy tannins.

2002 Arietta Variation One, 93 points (+?)

Good medium ruby. Brooding, medicinal aromas of inky black fruits. Tougher today than the 2003 from barrel, but offers outstanding flavor intensity and clarity, with notes of black raspberry, spice, licorice and chocolate emerging with aeration. Less obviously sweet today than the 2003 (I might have picked this blind as a classic Bordeaux blend including petit verdot and cab franc), but finishes with superb breadth of tannins. "The H Block is an homage to more refined Old World wines," notes Kongsgaard, "while this is more California exotic."

May/June 2004

2002 Arietta H Block Red Wine Napa Valley, 92-95 points

Good deep ruby-red. Rather restrained but complex aromas of currant, Havana tobacco, minerals, anise and espresso. Hugely dense, thick, and superripe, with mouthcoating flavors of dark berries, chocolate and mint. Not showing quite the same verve toady as the 2001, but this may well possess even stronger material for the long term. Finishes with palate-saturating tannins and superb length. Winemaker John Kongsgaard believes that the 2001 has great length and should be drunk in the first ten years, while the 2002, due in part to it's larger tannic structure, will take longer to fully express itself.

2002 Arietta Variation One Red Wine Napa Valley, 94-96 points

Fully ruby red. Superripe, complex, youthfully medicinal nose melds currant, leather, tobacco, black licorice, dark chocolate and game. Huge, lush and densely packed, with a depth charge of dark fruit flavor complicated by an exotic suggestion of maple syrup. Extremely young and long on the aftertaste. Both the syrah and merlot in this blend and the cabernet franc and merlot in the H Block are cofermented.

2002 Arietta Merlot Napa Valley, 93-95 points

Saturated medium ruby to the rim. Wild liqueur-like aromas of currant, tar, menthol, graphite and wild herbs. Lush, creamy and impressively rich, with superb depth of flavor for California merlot. Highly complex flavors of currant, tobacco, iron, graphite and spices ("pencil shavings and rusty nails," offers Kongsgaard). An exceptionally classy merlot that finishes with serious but utterly suave tannins and outstanding persistance.

2001 Arietta H Block Red Wine Napa Valley, 94 points

Good saturated ruby-red. Explosive, highly nuanced aromas of currant, dried rose, tobacco, brown sugar, espresso and mint. Silky, lush, dense and penetrating, with uncommon lift in the middle palate. Captivating flavors of currant, spice cake, tobacco and earth. A red blend in a Right Bank style with superb definition and snap. Finishes very long and juicy, with firm but thoroughly ripe tannins. This should gain in bottle for a decade or more.

2001 Arietta Variation One Red Wine Napa Valley 93, (+?) points

Fully ruby-red. Superripe, slightly roasted aromas of black raspberry, meat, animal fur, mint and maple syrup. Sweet, dense and packed, with a depth charge of dark fruit flavor complicated by an exotic suggestion of maple syrup. Extremely young and long on the aftertaste.

May/June 2003

2000 Arietta H Block Hudson Vineyards Napa Valley, 93 points

A blend of 50% cabernet franc and 50% merlot) Both the H Block and Variation I are from Hudson Vineyard fruit. Full red-ruby. Explosively aromatic nose melds blueberry, cassis, red cherry, violet, minerals, brown sugar and a tobacco leaf note suggestive of a Cohiba robusto. Very intense and densely packed, with urgent, penetrating red berry, bitter chocolate, mineral and rose petal flavors. Superb thickness leavened by bright acidity. Wonderfully complex, gripping wine, with a firmly tannic, very long back end. This grew more and more complex as it opened in the glass.

2000 Arietta Variation I Napa Valley, 93 points

A 72% merlot and 28% syrah blend. Deep red-ruby. Wilder, more animal aromas of black fruits, dark cherry, smoke, leather, licorice and game. Wonderfully sweet and stuffed with material; distinctly softer and fatter than the H Block bottling. Complex flavors of currant, plum, leather, licorice and minerals. Perhaps even longer on the finish than the H Block though not as fine, finishing with substantial dusty tannins. "A wilder, crazier, growling kind of a wine," admits winemaker John Kongsgaard.