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## PADMA LAKSHMI

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GROTH CABERNET REVISITED

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REPORT





# TASTING GROTH CABERNET SAUVIGNON

This chart includes 19 vintages of Groth Cabernet Sauvignon reviewed earlier this year by senior editor James Molesworth in a non-blind vertical tasting at the estate. Prices are not available. WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

WINE	SCORE	WINE	SCORE
<b>GROTH Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville Reserve 2021</b> Ripe, defined and very sleek, this delivers a pure beam of cassis, blackberry puree and black licorice flavors framed by notes of singed apple wood and sweet tobacco. Savory, wet slate and warm earth notes chime in, while latent energy drives the finish. This should emerge steadily with cellaring, with a long life ahead. Best from 2028 through 2042.	96	<b>GROTH Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville 2004</b> This takes a jump forward in terms of flesh and feel, with juicy dark currant and blackberry paste flavors lined liberally with singed anise, apple wood and sweet tobacco. There's a nice smoldering earth accent through the finish, showing a flash of iron. This is in a delicious spot right now. Drink now through 2034.	93
<b>GROTH Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville 2021</b> This features a lovely, polished stream of cassis, plum and blackberry fruit flavors lined with warm vanilla, black licorice and sweet tobacco, backed by solid focus and grip on the finish. Still youthfully toasty, but pleasurable now if you want that character. Hold if you want a more elegance and nuance. Drink now through 2038.	93	<b>GROTH Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville Reserve 1998</b> This offers a take on what a cool, wet vintage can yield, including a slightly more austere edge to the structure, along with more mulled fruit notes—dark currant and cherry—paired with an earth-, sage-, charcoal- and black tea-fueled finish. Though 1998 was panned early on, the vintage continues to show some surprising wines. Drink now through 2032.	92
<b>GROTH Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville Reserve 2019</b> Dark and tight, this is pretty closed down right now, though a well of cassis and black currant fruit is certainly there, along with notes of wet slate, sweet tobacco and licorice root. The finish shows some lively bramble and sassafras hints, along with ample tannic grip. More backward than the typical 2019. Worth holding off on. Best from 2027 through 2040.	95	<b>GROTH Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville Reserve 1997</b> Not a typical 1997, this is sleek and fresh instead of top-heavy and overripe, offering mouthwatering red currant and bitter cherry fruit laced with savory, wet flint and iron accents. The long and tight-grained finish shows a flash of singed cedar. Drink now through 2030.	94
<b>GROTH Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville 2017</b> There's a nice succulent feel to the flavors of cherry, plum and cassis in this fresh and forward version, backed by a red licorice-coated finish. A hint of warm stone keeps this honest at the end. Very solid for the vintage. Drink now through 2034.	91	<b>GROTH Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Reserve 1994</b> Dark and earthy, this is redolent of steeped red and black currant fruit, while showing notes of tobacco leaf, warm earth and dark tea. This has a slightly rugged edge alongside its darker persona, offering characterful maturity, range and depth. Drink now through 2034.	93
<b>GROTH Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville Reserve 2016</b> This vintage marks the return of this wine to classic-level status and it's showing ample breed today, with a long, dense and focused set of red and black currant paste flavors that are wrapped with singed earth, dried anise, incense and black tea notes. There's also terrific spine, with a wet slate and iron component driving underneath the fruit, as the finish shows a mouthwatering savory flurry. Drink now through 2042.	96	<b>GROTH Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Reserve 1992</b> This is noticeably dark and winey, with a still-youthful edge to its core of steeped black currant and blackberry fruit, giving way steadily to notes of singed anise, apple wood and black tea, while a tug of warm earth runs underneath. The finish is lengthy. Drink now through 2032.	95
<b>GROTH Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville 2012</b> A stylish version, featuring steeped black currant preserves mixed in with alluring notes of singed vanilla, black licorice, anise and black tea. The fleshy, persistent finish has good energy, with mouthwatering acidity nicely buried amid the fruit. Drink now through 2036.	93	<b>GROTH Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Reserve 1989</b> Trim but expressive, with a burst of blood orange and damson plum fruit, along with singed sandalwood and balsam wood notes. There's a fresh thyme and savory accent on the finish, along with an echo of green tea. This is on the back end of its life, but still has interest, showing persistence as it airs in the glass. Drink now.	89
<b>GROTH Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville Reserve 2009</b> This is concentrated, but more reserved in feel, with a long, sleek edge and enticing hints of singed anise and apple wood running along the edges of the cassis and blackberry paste core. There's good coiled energy and a late flurry of sage and savory on the finish—likely a sign of the rain that nicked harvest. Drink now through 2036.	94	<b>GROTH Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1987</b> This is very fresh and tangy, with sanguine, savory and iron notes leading gently mulled red and black currant fruit along. A savory edge really sparkles through the finish, which has a pleasantly dusty edge. Very pretty. Drink now through 2030.	93
<b>GROTH Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville 2008</b> Singed wood spice, anise and tobacco notes lead off in this version, which shows some nice development. The core of blackberry and black currant fruit has a sappy intensity, while wet earth underscores the lengthy finish. There's also a step up in concentration, which is probably due to the spring frost that reduced yields. Best from 2027 through 2040.	95	<b>GROTH Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Reserve 1985</b> This is a very rewarding experience today, showing a fleshy and enticing feel as sparkles of singed wood spice and black tea permeate a core of gently mulled blackberry and black currant fruit. Offers anise, cedar and apple wood subtleties through the finish, which expands steadily in the glass. Suave and alluring, this is more than holding up. Drink now through 2035.	97
<b>GROTH Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville Reserve 2005</b> Very fresh, brimming with succulent flavors of red currant and blackberry preserves that are still youthful, this version feels polished and friendly, ending with a licorice- and singed vanilla-coated finish. The fruit has a nice finishing kick, with some still-chewy grip (pleasantly so) and a subtle note of wet slate providing length. Drink now through 2036.	94	<b>GROTH Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1984</b> Mature, with supple dried cherry, red tea, orange peel and sandalwood notes that end with a pretty, perfumed finish. There's lingering freshness thanks to a sanguine echo. Drink now.	89
		<b>GROTH Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1982</b> This is lively, with lots of singed wood spice, grilled savory and blood orange zest notes darting around the core of fully mature dried cherry and black currant fruit. Fresh and lithe through the finish, with lingering length and tension. Drink now through 2030.	93

Suzanne Groth has now joined her father, Dennis, in running their family estate in Napa Valley.



# THE GREATNESS OF GROTH

**A**mong the many multigenerational, family-owned wineries in Napa Valley, Groth stands as an exemplar. The property was bought on a lark before anyone could have envisioned its ultimate potential. The vineyard initially yielded excellent results, then later succumbed to virus issues, only to achieve new glory after undergoing a major replanting. With the second generation now working to keep the business moving forward, the moment was right to look back on the estate's 40-year history through a retrospective tasting, covering the 1982 through 2021 vintages.

The story began in 1981, when Dennis and Judy Groth purchased a property on the Oakville Cross Road that they thought would be a retirement spot. Dennis was working in the Bay Area at the time for Atari, which was enjoying outsized success amid a larger economic downturn. He didn't know anything about farming, but as a wine lover, he did like the site, in large part because some vines

## A VERTICAL TASTING OF THIS NAPA CABERNET POWERHOUSE REVEALS 40 YEARS OF SUCCESS

*By James Molesworth*

were already there. Those vines—Cabernet Sauvignon and Napa Gamay—dated to the early 1970s, planted by Silver Oak founder and winemaker Justin Meyer. Prior to that, the property had been a dairy farm.

“Atari gave us an opportunity to invest,” Dennis says. “Judy and I were deciding between a beach house and a winery. I’d had an epiphany with a ’66 BV Georges de Latour and that steered us to wine. The original plan was just to sell the grapes, and we began by sending the Gamay to the local co-op, then

run by the Gallo family.”

But the market for selling grapes didn't materialize the way the Groths expected, so they decided on plan B: to make all of the wine themselves. In 1982, the couple debuted a small amount of Cabernet Sauvignon under their own name and then purchased a second property in Oak Knoll to the south. Diamond Creek winemaker Jerry Loper helped the Groths make that first wine while they were looking for a full-time winemaker.



“Nils Venge then came on board right at the end of 1982, after Jerry Looper helped us out,” Dennis says. “We didn’t have a winery at that time, so Nils didn’t want to join until we had a winery use permit. But before he came on board, he did help choose the fruit, picking all the grapes from the blocks along the Conn Creek side of the vineyard. We picked in October in 100-plus degree weather after some rain in September. The wine was aged in 100% new oak because we were new and had to buy all new barrels at first. Then after the ’82, Nils said, ‘Let’s make a reserve bottling—picked a little riper and aged in all new oak—and we’ll be famous.’” With a smile and a shrug, he adds: “And well . . .”

The Reserve bottling first appeared in 1983 and was considered a success. The 1985 then helped cement Groth’s early reputation—and the wine is still going strong today. There were a number of examples of both the Reserve and Napa bottlings among the 19 vintages included in my recent vertical tasting, conducted at the estate with Dennis and his daughter Suzanne, as well as current winemaker Ted Henry. If you’re lucky enough to track one down, the ’85 Reserve offers a very rewarding experience, with a fleshy and enticing feel as sparkles of singed wood spice and black tea permeate the core of gently mulled blackberry and black currant fruit. The wine expands steadily in the glass, showing additional anise, cedar and apple wood subtleties. It’s a suave and alluring example that’s more than holding up. I rated it 97 points in the tasting.

The blocks along Conn Creek that Venge isolated for the Reserve bottling remain dedicated to that wine, while the rest of the Cabernet in the vineyard goes to the Napa bottling. The soils in the Reserve blocks feature chert stones that impart a distinct flinty minerality to the wine, also evident in the ’85 and the other Reserve bottlings included in the vertical. Overall, the



Dennis and Judy Groth in the late 1980s as they oversaw construction of a winery on the property they’d purchased earlier in the decade as a retirement plan.

consistent DNA of Groth Cabernet came through in our tasting, with red currant and blackberry fruit profiles that age steadily and slowly into graceful wines marked by savory, red tea and warm earth notes. The tasting also showed the ups and downs of the vineyard through its decades under Groth ownership.

Atari crashed in the mid-’80s and the Groths’ “retirement” plan was accelerated. By 1985, they were cranking out 30,000 cases of wine with Venge. A winery was built in 1990 to keep up with the growing production, while the business went through varying changes, including Michael Weiss replacing the retiring Venge in

Groth’s winery and estate vineyards on the Oakville Cross Road



TOP: COURTESY OF GROTH; BOTTOM: JASON TINACCI



1994. In the vineyard, the poor-selling Gamay was quickly pulled out for Chardonnay.

“Chardonnay was worth more than Cabernet at the time,” Dennis says. “I remember Justin Meyer walking by as we were planting the Chardonnay and he said, ‘What a shame.’ I asked him why and he said, ‘Plant what the ground tells you to plant—this is Cabernet land.’ Well, he was right. It took a little while, but the economics of Chardonnay and Cabernet flipped by the late 1990s.”

The upward trajectory for Groth as a top Cabernet producer was interrupted when Meyer’s initial Cabernet plantings from the early 1970s began to show their age and succumb to virus issues. By 1998, a large-scale replant was undertaken and estate production dropped. Outside fruit purchased from Jean Phillips helped keep things going, but there was no Reserve bottling from 1999 through 2004.

But wine is a long game. By 2004, the 97-acre Oakville property had been fully replanted, resulting in 50 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon, along with 32 acres of Sauvignon Blanc on the vineyard’s eastern flank, where the soil changes. Another 11 acres of Sémillon, as well as drops of Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot, completed the mix. The first Reserve bottling after the replant was released in the 2005 vintage, and the winery was suddenly back.

“I think we acquitted ourselves pretty well,” Dennis says. Referring to the time after the authorization of the Oakville AVA in 1993, he adds, “Oakville had established itself by then. The initial impetus for the AVA was we wanted to avoid the ‘Sonoma-fication’ of Napa, which had a lot of overlapping sub-AVAs, such as Carneros. Along with Tim Mondavi and others in the association, we wanted to fill out the valley with subcategories but keep them distinct. Cabernet proved to be the right fit for Oakville.”

That same period of upheaval in the vineyard was marked by other changes as well, with the second generation of the Groth family entering the business. “Wineries should not be publicly held,” Dennis says. “It’s not an easy business, but if you have the will and the skill, you can continue to be family-held. When I was in Silicon Valley, executives would always ask me, ‘What’s your exit plan?’ Exit plan? Heck, I was thinking about how the Antinoris had gotten to 20-something generations of a family business. Once Suzanne expressed interest in joining, suddenly I saw it was easy to make the decision to keep this a family-owned business.”

Suzanne came aboard after having worked outside the company as a wine broker. She soon found herself getting a lesson in Groth history. “I started in the family business in ’99 as a 30 year old,” Suzanne says. “I had sold a lot of young wine before coming back. Then I tasted our own ’82 with my dad and I told him I thought it was over the hill.”

“And when she said that, I called BS,” Dennis says. “I went out and bought a six-pack of ’82 Bordeaux, the five first-growths and a Château Palmer. We sat down and did a blind tasting with our wine in there, and Suzanne changed her mind.”

“That was a good perspective,” Suzanne says with a laugh.

“After that I felt great,” Dennis says. “When we got here, we weren’t winemakers. But after tasting those ’82s along with what we did, yeah, we knew we could make great wine. Don’t forget, when we bought the land, Oakville wasn’t even an AVA yet. There was no consensus early on that it would be great Cab territory.”

Suzanne is now president of the company and handles more of the day-to-day operations.

Change has continued in other areas as well. Winemaker Cameron Parry was hired in 2014 and started a replanting program aimed at rejuvenating the vineyard in smaller, regularly spaced portions—to avoid the dramatic turnover the Groths went through in the late 1990s and early 2000s. He was replaced in 2021 by Ted Henry, previously with Clos du Val and Jarvis, who picked up where Parry left off.

“That lesson was learned when the Groths had to replant the entire Reserve block at once,” Henry says. “I have been continuing that plan with 2 to 8 acres per year of replanting the estate. The last Oakville replant in 2023 was 2 acres right in front of the winery. We have taken advantage of the replants to improve row spacing and trellising to achieve better shading of fruit and increase

vine density a bit. We have also built in the infrastructure to make mechanization possible in the future, if we ever needed to go that direction.”

Fortune also favored Henry from the start with the superlative 2021 vintage. His first bottling of the Reserve is ripe, defined and very sleek, delivering a pure beam of cassis, blackberry puree and black licorice notes framed by singed apple wood and sweet tobacco. In terms of ageability, the 2021 seems destined to extend the track record of this long-lived wine.

Henry and the Groths have also continued to shift to more holistic farming practices. Gone are the perfectly arranged vineyard rows that indicate strip spraying of weeds under the vines.

“The vineyard has changed a lot,” Suzanne says. “We don’t want to go through a massive replant like that again. We’ve shifted the approach to farming. We used to have those manicured rows for example, but we’ve gone to full cover crop in recent years. I remember when we first started, mom asked if the vineyard looked a little messy, and I said, ‘No.’ A little messy is ok. Healthier soils, healthier vines and a longer-lived vineyard matters more.”

“It’s been a lot to learn over the years,” Dennis says. “Little things, such as learning to cut off the second crop clusters before the pickers came, since they’re paid by weight and would throw those into the bins along with the good fruit. We’ve had to learn new technologies along the way. We’ve gone from having 5-ton gondolas of fruit hauled around to small bin harvesting, new presses, picking at night and on and on.”

“There are so many little things to deal with,” he adds. “It’s been a lot of changes. I could be back making widgets in Silicon Valley. That was fun too.” He pauses to reflect, then says with a grin, “But it wouldn’t be as much fun as this.”



Since coming aboard in 2021, winemaker Ted Henry is helping position Groth for the future with improvements in the vineyard and cellar.