

## Opus One - a vertical

10 Nov 2004 by JR

See inside information for lots of [techie stuff](#) on Opus One.

This was a fascinating tasting through history. The first vintage, 1979, was pure California – California fruit and California winemaking, of that era. Lucien Sionneau came over from Bordeaux but he was too late to have much impact on the final wine, except for identifying some potential lots of press wine which in the end were not used. But something had to be released because the announcement had been made.

Then the 1986, and indeed most wines of the late 1980s from Opus, demonstrate the very particular character of a wine made from fruit grown California style but vinified *à la bordelaise*. And then during the 1990s we see the formula settling down to a harmonious blend of the best of Bordeaux with the best of California. I don't think you would ever mistake these wines for a top bordeaux – they're too ripe and sweet for that. And yet they have a much drier, tauter, more French accent than most of their peers. And they certainly don't belong to the school of overripe, over-alcoholic, over the top California Cabernets of which we have seen so much in recent years.

### Opus One 1979 15 Drink up

*Perfect summer then rainy Sep. Early harvest. Debut vintage, from To-Kalon vineyard, made at Mondavi winery. Lucien Sionneau of Mouton oversaw the blend.*

*Cabernet Sauvignon 80%, Cabernet Franc 16%, Merlot 4%*

*Skin contact 10 days*

*24 months in new French oak*

*12.9% alcohol*

Mature rim. Mid depth of ruby. Low-key. Mature. Very ripe, almost porty. Sweet and gentle. Big bruiser. Definitely Californian on the palate, though the acidity is starting to dominate. Losing fruit dangerously. Slightly dry, but neat, finish.

### Opus One 1986 16 Drink now-2006

*Early budbreak, even longer growing season than 1985. To-Kalon fruit still. Patrick Leon of Mouton in charge.*

*Cabernet Sauvignon 87%, Cabernet Franc 9%, Merlot 4%*

*Skin contact 21 days*

*18 months in new French oak*

*12.7%*

Slightly watery rim. Good depth of crimson with muddy orange rim. Still quite youthful. Some oak! Gentle cassis. Good texture. Interesting combination of Californian-style fruit and Bordeaux winemaking. Tannins still evident. Acidity increasing. A bit awkward and gawky.

**Opus One 1991** 18 Drink now-2010

*Drought ended by 17" rain in March. Long, cool growing season; large crop. First vintage to be made at Opus One winery, surrounded by young vines that would have to be replanted thanks to phylloxera.*

*Cabernet Sauvignon 93%, Cabernet Franc 6%, Merlot 1%*

*Skin contact 33 days*

*15 months in new French oak*

*13.4%*

Deep, healthy crimson. Still looks quite youthful. Quite different on the nose from 1979 and 1986. Much more mineral and earthy. More finesse and delicacy. More Bordelais. Fine and quite concentrated. Dense, but convincing. Drier (as opposed to sweeter) than the 1979 or 1986. Confident.

**Opus One 1993** 17.5 Drink now-2009

*Smaller berries and crop size than usual. Estate fruit had to be supplemented by To-Kalon produce.*

*Cabernet Sauvignon 89%, Cabernet Franc 7%, Merlot 4%*

*Skin contact 42 days*

*18 months in new French oak*

*13.4%*

Very deep colour. Still vibrant crimson. More voluptuous and easier than the 1991. Very engaging nose. Inky and dusty. Fine, ripe tannins. I can imagine other California winemakers envying this! Very, very refreshing and appetising. Neat dry finish. Lacy. Not dense.

**Opus One 1994** 18.5 Drink now-2013

*Very long, cool growing season led to highly regarded vintage.*

*Cabernet Sauvignon 93%, Cabernet Franc 4%, Merlot 2%, Malbec 1%*

*Skin contact 43 days*

*18 months in new French oak*

*13.4%*

Slightly pale with an even paler rim. Sweet cherry-chocolate aromas. Rather simpler than the 1993 on the nose, in fact. Then it took on a certain minerality. Big and bold and chewy finish. Very graceful. Not a bruiser. Quite elegant. More intense than the 1991.

**Opus One 1995** 18 Drink 2004-2010

*Another prolonged growing season with the harvest from late Sep to mid Oct.*

*Cabernet Sauvignon 86%, Cabernet Franc 7%, Merlot 5%, Malbec 2%*

*Skin contact 39 days*

*18 months in new French oak*

13.5%

A certain herbaceousness on the nose, though no shortage of ripeness underneath. Tea-leaf aromas. Mineral kick. Round and ready and plump and forward, though tannins insist at the finish. Good acidity. (More than the 1994.) Very good balance.

**Opus One 1996** 17.5 Drink 2005-2015

*Continued heat spells resulted in small, relatively early crop of very ripe berries..*

*Cabernet Sauvignon 86%, Cabernet Franc 8%, Merlot 3%, Malbec 3%*

*Skin contact 37 days*

*19 months in new French oak*

13.9%

Slightly dull crimson. Especially aromatic. Very slightly soapy nose. Floral. Aggressively lively. Very sweet start to the palate, with lots of tannin. Very dry finish. Slightly gawky nose. Not nearly as balanced as the 1995.

**Opus One 1997** 19 Drink 2008-2020

*First vintage to be made from as much as 90% estate fruit. Extensive sunlight in 1996 led to heavy fruit set and then crop thinning to lost in a decade. Rapid harvest spread over only 11 days.*

*Cabernet Sauvignon 82%, Cabernet Franc 8%, Merlot 5%, Malbec 4%, Petit Verdot 1%*

*Skin contact 32 days*

*18 months in new French oak*

13.9%

Exceptionally deep crimson. Very, very dense and introvert. Unforthcoming now, but very convincing. Extremely dense, velvety, and voluptuous. I'm afraid I thought of Mendoza and ink at first because of that combination of velvetiness and astringency, but it should be very good eventually. Very dry finish.

**Opus One 1998** 17 Drink 2008-2012

*El Nino brought rain and changeable weather followed by exceptionally late Oct harvest. A vintage damned from the start.*

*Cabernet Sauvignon 91%, Cabernet Franc 7%, Merlot 1%, Petit Verdot & Malbec 1%*

*Skin contact 36 days*

*16 months in new French oak*

*13.7%*

Very, very glossy crimson with some evolution already at the rim. Toasty, open nose. Sweet start to the palate. Nothing like the 1997 in nobility. Tannins and acidity crowd in at the finish. Jagged. Difficult to predict evolution. Slightly hot finish.

**Opus One 1999** 18 Drink 2010-2020

*Spring rains reduced berry set. Indian summer much valued for late ripening.*

*Cabernet Sauvignon 84%, Cabernet Franc 5%, Merlot 7%, Malbec 3%, Petit Verdot 1%*

*Skin contact 40 days*

*17 months in new French oak*

Quite purple and deep. Still quite simple on the nose. Quite tough and intense and reined in. Something quite sweet about this. Masses of acidity. Some coffee. Big, bold, and unevolved, but not a single corner or join in evidence. Smoothness itself.