

West Coast wanderer returns

5 Aug 2009 by Jancis Robinson

Just trying to overcome jetlag, the price to be paid for a great trip to the west coast of North America last month that took me to [Santa Cruz](#), San Francisco, [Napa Valley](#) (very briefly), Vancouver, Okanagan Valley, [Oregon](#), [Sacramento](#) and back to [San Francisco](#).

Although it was only a year ago that we were last in northern California, I was struck very forcefully by how delightfully **mainstream** an interest in wine has become in all these areas. America has at last become the world's biggest market for wine, and the widespread enthusiasm for this delicious drink makes it a great place for a wine writer to visit.

Not for the first time I was struck by the standard of **wine service in the US** in general, and in northern California in particular. Although Britain is slowly catching up, it is still SO much easier to get good wine by the glass in restaurants in the US than in the UK – even if there is, I suspect, a vast tract between the coasts where it is still quite difficult. For example, on our second night in San Francisco we had dinner with John Wood, head of the admirable charity [Room to Read](#), at Rajat Parr's new restaurant RN74. Parr has managed to attract Christie Dufault (pictured here at work at a [Spottswode](#) tasting), the talented sommelier whom we had met a year before when dining at Quince. Three different California Pinots among the many wines offered by the glass tempted me and I ordered a glass of each for the table. She immediately offered to give us each a flight consisting of a third of a pour of all three wines and delivered them with aplomb and, a rarer virtue among American serving staff, discretion. She didn't interrupt us or bombard us with information but, gently prodded, she reminded us of the evening at Quince and told us exactly which wines we had ordered there. Impressive indeed.

And as for the general standard of **food** in that Pacific-cooled part of the world we have just visited, both in restaurants and with regard to the produce available, I can't recommend it highly enough. It is light years from the stereotype of over-industrialised, mass-produced fast food that is popularly associated with American culture – and betrays a fascinating array of different influences and cuisines. We enjoyed three superb and often extremely varied meals each day.

But, back to work Jancis, with the following brief previews of the **2009 vintage** and the odd general observation.

Northern California – All is going well so far in the vineyard if not in the marketplace. The growing season has been cool and harvest is likely to be late after a very wet spring that saw five inches of rain in May in Napa Valley, resulting in a particularly dense canopy that needed considerable thinning. The crop will probably be quite small, much to everyone's relief as sales of many higher-end wines are dismally slow. As Linda Murphy reported in [California prices soften](#), demand for wines other than the better-value offerings are extremely sluggish, especially for that huge cohort of wines just below cult status (and even the cult wine mailing lists have been changing considerably as old customers cut back on or refuse their allocations). Many growers without long-term contracts are in a very difficult position.

Oregon – A very hot July may be followed by an inconveniently large crop. The market is, similarly, over-supplied here and more and more wine is likely to end up in cheaper brands rather than behind very high-end labels.

British Columbia – Winter damage, always a threat in the Okanagan Valley, was quite considerable (so presumably also in the vineyards of Washington state across the border). Summer has been hot with the bushfires and possibly smoke damage in July that I noted in [Okanagan in the smoke](#).