



Estate Donelan Wines

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Most of us associate Californian wineries with the pompous buildings dotted around Napa Valley. For the few tourists that make it into Sonoma, the shock could not be bigger. Here you will find more humble estates, where the wine seems to be what matters, not the looks of the tasting room. But even in this less ostentatious area, Donelan Wines is probably the least apparent place you can imagine.

Not that it is a problem, but a winery in a business park in Santa Rosa really seems far far away from the multi-million dollar palaces of Napa. However, a walk into the "winery" makes you realise that there is actual work going on here. Its not just perfectly polished casks and shiny floors. People go about tasting and assembling wines and whatever else needs to be done. What you probably would not imagine is that these wines are some of the highest rated Rhone Rangers to come out of California.

However, things here started with a different name about 10 years ago. Pax was the name of the winery, named after Pax Mahle the previous winemaker. He made wines that were rather big, if not over the top and quite delicious. However, since around 2007 things have changed drastically. The name of the winery has changed to Donelan Wines, the owners' name and a new winemaker has come on board. The young man now in charge is Tyler Thomas, who makes wines that would astonish more than one of us.

Wines so pure and drinkable, they are more like their European counterparts than the competition from home

Why? Well, first of all they aren't alcohol bombs. What Tyler tries to make are wines that are structured and balanced, whilst remaining drinkable. You won't find any 16% killers here. Rather, they all tend to be around 13% and allow you to enjoy a couple of glasses without that headache when you wake up on the next morning. Furthermore, there is beautiful purity to these wines. Whether you taste the Roussanne/Viognier blend ("Venus") or the syrahs. All of them have remarkable freshness for wines from an area as warm as Sonoma.

What is striking is that despite getting 100 points every now and then for some wines, the whole Donelan range stays surprisingly affordable. That means that even the top cuvees, Richard's and Obsidian, go for no more than a third of what other wines of this calibre would set you back in California. Whilst not being cheap per se, they offer tremendous value for money. They are wines of incredible definition, unique character and beautiful concentration. Both of them are wines that never get cloying or feel too rich, quite the opposite: They remain balanced, despite being their power.

So, once you have had enough of golden toilets in tasting rooms to beef up prices, and want to taste wines from a more honest place give the Donelan wines a shot. They can't host you in a palace, but count among the most interesting wines in Northern California.