

Stephen Tanzer's INTERNATIONAL WINE CELLAR

Vineyard 7 & 8

By Stephen Tanzer

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The breakthrough vintage for this promising new venture near the top of Spring Mountain will be the 2007, which was vinified by the talented Luc Morlet, who started here in July of last year, early enough to take steps to improve canopy management and reduce the size of the crop. The 40-acre property, purchased in 1999, is owned by Launny and Weezie Steffens, and now managed by their son Wesley. There were 14 acres of vines planted here in the late '80s and early '90s, but the Steffens family is in the process of replanting their terraced blocks, and in the meantime has been leasing a couple of vineyard blocks from neighbors on Spring Mountain. The cabernet is sorted by cluster and then berry by berry, then vinified in small stainless steel fermenters. With the '07 vintage, the wine is being aged in all new barriques. The earlier vintages here (the first commercial release was 2004) were made by Larry Langdon with a consulting assist from Christian LeSommer, who served for many years as manager of Chateau Latour. Incidentally, the name of the property is a reference to lucky numbers in the West and Far East.

2005 Vineyard 7 and 8 Chardonnay "8" Spring Mountain District 89
(\$50) Medium yellow. Pineapple, beeswax and a note of coconut on the nose, along with a whiff of vanilla. Rather sweet and pineapple-dominated, but kept fresh by an edge of acidity, which Luc Morlet notes is natural. A fresh, juicy, persistent chardonnay with a slightly edgy finish, no doubt partly due to the fact that the wine did not go through malolactic fermentation.

2006 Vineyard 7 and 8 Chardonnay "8" Spring Mountain District 91
(\$50) Full, bright yellow. More complex, muskier nose offers pineapple, minerals and smoke. Sweet and fresh, with a distinctly suaver texture and more nuance than the 2005. Pineapple and stone fruit flavors are complicated by intriguing minerality. This also possesses bright acidity but comes across as more harmonious from the start.

2005 Vineyard 7 and 8 Cabernet Sauvignon "7" Spring Mountain District 89
(\$90) Good bright ruby-red. Pungent aromas of currant, eucalyptus, tar, pepper, herbs and cedary oak. The herbal character follows through on the palate, which offers surprising intensity. Finishes a bit dry, with slightly tough tannins. Not a particularly ripe style-perhaps from fruit harvested with less than ideal phenolic maturity. This reminded me of a northern Medoc wine from a moderately ripe year.

2006 Vineyard 7 and 8 Cabernet Sauvignon "7" Spring Mountain District 89-92
(\$90) Good saturated ruby. Aromas of black cherry, licorice and bitter chocolate; less green than the 2005 but still with some Bordeaux-reminiscent tobacco leaf. Then a step up in ripeness, texture and density, with good sweetness but also a slightly peppery quality that carries through to the finish. This was the first wine vinified in the new winery, where smaller fermenters permit more precise harvesting. Finishes with more breadth than the 2005 and some rather powerful tannins.

2007 Vineyard 7 and 8 Cabernet Sauvignon "7" Spring Mountain District 92-95
(total maceration time was up to 32 days, including a cold soak, vs. 21 days in previous years) Saturated ruby. Captivating nose offers black raspberry, smoke and a hint of game; the first vintage here to avoid herbal aromas. Then fat, dense and substantial, with a chocolaty ripeness to the mouthfilling, layered dark berry flavors. A superb example of powerful mountain fruit, and at a completely different level from the earlier vintages. The superb rising finish features big but thoroughly ripe, silky tannins that coat the cheeks and teeth. This features 75% estate fruit, with much stricter crop thinning practiced during the summer.