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Stéphane Derenoncourt's Impressive New Wines

French consulting winemaker finds creative outlet in Napa

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Stéphane Derenoncourt stopped by my office in Napa this week to show me his new wines under the Derenoncourt label.

It's an ambitious project for a most ambitious winemaker.

Winemaker barely defines the breadth and scope of his work. He consults for nearly 70 wineries in 10 countries, including his native France (where he has 27 clients in St.-Emilion alone), but also in such faraway places as Turkey, China, Lebanon, India and Chile. His next stop after leaving Napa is Chile, for a Pinot Noir project.

Derenoncourt, 48, came up through the ranks. The son of a steel-mill worker, he never finished high school, working odd jobs and having never seen a vine until hitchhiking to Bordeaux. Today, however, he is a highly regarded vigneron.

And he couldn't resist branching out into California. For Derenoncourt (as well as for many other foreign winemakers), the state's appeal lies in the simple reason that here you can start from scratch and not be bound by traditions.

His California venture is anchored in Napa Valley, where four of his five new wines come from. He was hired last year to work with Francis & Eleanor Coppola's Rubicon Estate in Rutherford, which he also visited this week.

Derenoncourt's lineup of 2006 wines, made in partnership with the Montesquieu wine group, is about as uniformly consistent stylistically as any I've ever tasted.

All five share dark red colors, rich, extracted flavors, density, texture, focus, concentration, depth and complexity. All have pleasantly loamy earthy flavors and ripe tannins.

The wines are also rather expensive once you get past the \$40 Lake Country Cabernet Sauvignon. The Syrah sells for \$60, the Merlot and Cabernet Franc for \$140, and the Cabernet for \$220.

The best bet is the **Derenoncourt Lake County Red Hills Cabernet**, which is perhaps the finest red wine I've tasted from this appellation north of Napa Valley. Derenoncourt said the allure of the red soils there attracted him and the wine is rich and loamy, with dusty cedar and red cherry fruit. Some 575 cases were produced.

The **Derenoncourt Napa Valley Syrah** is from Hudson Vineyard, but includes 15 percent Merlot from elsewhere, hence no vineyard designation. It was less sharply defined than the other wines, yet still gutsy, complex, tight and concentrated. 600 cases were made.

The **Derenoncourt Merlot** from Stagecoach Vineyard is pure, rich and concentrated, dense and chewy, with great depth, balance and concentration. Only 100 cases were made.

The **Cabernet Franc** was perhaps the most impressive. It offers wonderful aromatics and is rich and structured, with tight tobacco leaf, currant, berry and spice notes. It comes from Caldwell Vineyard. 225 cases were produced.

"The Cabernet Franc was a dream for me," he said, since that's the grape he is most familiar with, adding, "I always try to get some sensuality into the wines."

The **Derenoncourt Cabernet Sauvignon** is also from Caldwell. Pure, rich and polished, dense and concentrated, it exhibits a touch more creamy oak than the other wines, ending with great length and persistence. 100 cases made.

With 2007, Derenoncourt is adding a Cabernet from Inkgrade in Napa and a trio of reds—Cabernet, Merlot and Syrah—from Cotturi in Sonoma