



LARKMEAD'S SOLARI CABERNET AND LMV SALON: 2001-2015  
STEPHEN TANZER, VINOUS, AUGUST 29, 2019



The Larkmead estate just south of the town of Calistoga dates back to the 19th century, but it's safe to say that only in the 21st century have owners Kate Solari Baker and Cam Baker truly capitalized on the site's disparate soil types. In fact, the 110-acre property, a very warm valley floor site, is remarkably diverse, featuring seven different soil profiles, and Larkmead's six red wines—three blends and three Cabernet Sauvignons, the latter based on single parcels or soil types—take full advantage of this multifaceted estate.

This spring I had the opportunity to experience vertical tastings of two of Larkmead's top bottlings, one a Cabernet Sauvignon and the other a blend. I was impressed anew with the exhaustive work that has taken place in both the vineyards and the winery over the past 20 years here. Even the two wines I focused on—the Solari Cabernet Sauvignon and the LMV Salon—have evolved dramatically since their initial vintages (2001 and 2003, respectively) and winemaker Dan Petroski continues to fine-tune these wines in search of greater complexity and longevity and more moderate alcohol levels.



## AN ESTATE WITH A COLORFUL HISTORY

Larkmead estate, located on Larkmead Lane on the south side of Calistoga, is one of Napa Valley's largest remaining family operations, offering a wide range of soil types that are particularly suited to Bordeaux red varieties. The property was first owned as a summer retreat by army surgeon Charles Hitchcock, who had moved in 1851 from North Carolina to San Francisco with his wife Martha and daughter Lillie. Lillie, whose drinking, smoking and poker playing were unconventional for her time, was eventually sent by her parents to their country estate to calm down. She named the property Larkmead and was responsible for extensively landscaping it and planting a large vineyard; she also made it a destination for her artistic and intellectual friends in San Francisco. At the time there was actually a Larkmead Station stop on the Napa Valley Railroad, which had recently been constructed by Sam Brannan, the millionaire owner of Calistoga's earliest hotel/resort, who needed a way to induce visitors to venture so far north of San Francisco.

Lillie Hitchcock married wealthy businessman Howard Coit in 1863 and was widowed in 1885. She went on to become one of San Francisco's most famous historical figures and a lifelong patron of the San Francisco Fire Department after having been saved as a child from a burning building by a volunteer fire fighter, as two of her playmates burned to death. Her estate later funded the construction of Coit Tower in 1933. From 1895 through 1942, Larkmead was owned by the Salmina family from Switzerland. Felix Salmina, who had a winemaking background, leased the old wood Larkmead winery in 1895 and purchased it in 1903. By 1906 he finished building a new winery from stone taken from the nearby hills.

Following two changes in ownership after the death of Felix Salmina in 1940, Larry and Polly Solari purchased Larkmead in 1948. At the same time, Larry Solari took a job as sales manager for Italian Swiss Colony, becoming an early pioneer in convincing Americans that wine should have a place at their dinner tables. Through his association with Larkmead and Italian Swiss Colony, Solari became a major client for the wine grapes of local growers.

The Solaris' daughter Kate grew up in Napa Valley, becoming an accomplished artist. She and her husband Cam Baker eventually took over operation of Larkmead in 1992 and have been responsible for turning what had long been a famous vineyard and winery into a first-class wine estate. They quickly embarked on a meticulous program to completely replant the property, carefully matching varieties, clones and rootstocks to the unique characteristics of the sprawling estate's multiple blocks and complex soil types.

The Bakers subsequently hired their famous architect friend Howard Backen to construct a modern winery,



where they began vinifying their wines in 2005. Today, there are just over 110 acres under vine at Larkmead, and in 2013 the winemaking facility was totally renovated. The number of fermentation tanks was increased from 12 in the original winery to 28 in the new one, which greatly enhanced Larkmead's ability to separately vinify multiple distinctive sites on the property.

#### A LARGE AND DIVERSE PROPERTY

Larkmead's acreage stretches from Highway 29 nearly all the way across the valley floor to the Silverado Trail (it actually ends at Selby Creek, less than a quarter-mile from the Trail). The property lies on both sides of the Napa River at the conjunction of two colluvial fans that extend down from the Mayacamas and Vaca mountain ranges. There are significant clay deposits through the middle of the property, on both sides of the Napa River. Unlike in many river-adjacent sites, most of the finer silt has been carried down the valley over the eons; up to 300 feet of ancient riverbed gravel lies directly beneath six to ten feet of mostly loamy soil, allowing for the kind of drainage that's normally associated with hillside vineyards. Winemaker Dan Petroski provided a more nuanced description of Larkmead's soil as "gravel coming down from the Mayacamas range and sand coming down from the Vaca range." Basically, he added, "at some point the top of the Vaca mountain range fell off and essentially crushed the cobble on the valley floor." Larkmead's various C blocks, essentially situated between the Napa River and Selby Creek, feature heavier soils along the Napa River but also poor, shallower soils featuring a mix of clay, sand, silt and gravel where the Napa River and Selby Creek meet—the latter "very good for vines," according to Petroski.

New owners Kate Solari Baker and Cam Baker finished most of their original replanting of the estate in 1995, but then launched a new vineyard redevelopment project in 2007, eventually replanting 90 of their 110 acres of vines. They had made some overoptimistic choices in the '90s by planting varieties like Syrah, Zinfandel and Viognier, which they came to believe were unsuitable to the site, and they were having problems with leaf roll virus as well. They also made changes in row direction beginning in '07, in order to protect their fruit more effectively against the hot afternoon sun. Indeed, some vintages in the early '00s had suffered from vine stress due in part to severe heat spikes late in the growing season.

The new regime at Larkmead released their first red wine, a Cabernet Sauvignon, from the 1997 vintage. Paul Hobbs was the consulting winemaker then, and Andy Smith, born and raised in Scotland and an enology graduate of Lincoln University in New Zealand, was Hobbs's assistant. Smith was hired as winemaker at Larkmead in 1999, at the same time that he took over full-time winemaking duties at DuMOL in Windsor, a winery that then specialized in making Chardonnay and Pinot Noir from top sites in Russian River Valley. Smith directed winemaking at Larkmead until 2013, at which point he left to devote his full attention to DuMOL, where he is a partner. Dan Petroski, who had begun working at Larkmead as cellar master and Smith's assistant in 2007, gradually took over more of the winemaking duties as Smith became senior



winemaker. Petroski was appointed head winemaker when Smith left.

Larkmead released its first Solari Reserve Cabernet in 2001, from the estate's oldest vines, planted to Clone 7 in the '80s on two gravelly blocks on opposite sides of the vineyard, plus a bit of young Clone 337. In 2003, the winery introduced two Bordeaux blends, the Merlot-based Firebelle and the Cabernet-based LMV Salon. (A small high-end Cabernet Sauvignon called The Lark was introduced in 2006 from a single very low-yielding parcel on rich, cobbly soil—technically Bale loam surrounded by Cortina gravelly loam—but Petroski makes it clear that the Solari Cabernet is Larkmead's flagship wine.)

Sources for the Solari bottling have changed over the years (for example, what was originally the most important Solari block of vines, located close to Highway 29, was pulled out in 2007 at 25 years of age), as has the work in the vineyards and winery. Beginning with the 2007 release, the Solari has essentially come from a single gravelly four-acre parcel planted to Cabernet Sauvignon clones 4 and 15, located directly across Larkmead Lane from the winery. (The Solari Cabernet vines normally yield a modest 2.75 tons per acre.) The gravelly soil, ideal for Cabernet, typically produces wine with cassis fruit and floral lift, often with an element of graphite minerality. Larkmead continued to include a small percentage of Petit Verdot from sandier soil on the opposite side of the Napa River, although Petroski has not used any Petit Verdot since vintage 2013.

The parcels used to make the LMV Salon have also changed dramatically over the years since this wine was first made in 2003. From 2003 through 2007 the wine came from multiple parcels all over the property. It was typically a five-variety Bordeaux blend based on Cabernet Sauvignon through 2010 but since 2012 has been made entirely from Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc. In fact, as of 2016, Petroski has entirely removed Petit Verdot and Malbec from the Larkmead program. "Now we're a three-trick pony," he told me, and most of the estate's Merlot goes into its Firebelle bottling. Since 2008, the Cabernet Sauvignon component of the LMV Salon has come from a new, higher-density replanting of Clone 4 vines in the extreme northeast section of the estate, next to Selby Creek, where vine yields are fairly vigorous at up to four tons per acre owing to the youth of the vines. But the Cabernet Franc component of the wines is from vines near Selby Creek that produce just 2.2 to 2.5 tons per acre, and sometimes less; Petroski attributes the low yields to "a combination of rootstock, clone and vine health." Partly for this reason Larkmead has grafted over some Cabernet Sauvignon vines next to the Solari parcel to Cabernet Franc for future use in the LMV Salon blend.

I should note that while Larkmead's production has steadily risen and the estate now routinely offers six different red wines the Bakers still sell off a good portion of their fruit—about 50% of it in 2019, according to Petroski. From 1961 through 1980, the fruit was sold exclusively to Inglenook, and later on buyers included Duckhorn Vineyards, Cakebread Cellars, Stag's Leap Wine Cellars and David Ramey. More recent



clients for Larkmead grapes have included Darioush, Realm Cellars, The Napa Valley Reserve and Rivers-Marie, whose Calistoga Cabernet is based on Larkmead fruit.

#### A CALISTOGA SITE CHALLENGED BY HEAT

I asked Petroski what the single biggest challenge was in making wine at Larkmead. He answered with a single word: “Heat.” The site produces fruit with very high levels of sugar and normally high pHs: the Solari Cabernet is routinely bottled with a pH between 3.9 and 4.0, and the LMV Salon blend is just a tad lower. Alcohol levels are almost invariably between 14.5% and 14.9% for the LMV Salon but consistently in the 15s for the Solari, at least until the past few growing seasons.

Global warming has exacerbated growing-season extremes at this site. About ten years ago I interviewed Andy Smith on the effects of climate change for my old Winophilia site, and he began by stating that climate change had resulted in more extreme and more unpredictable weather conditions in Calistoga: “an enlarged frost window in spring, increasingly unpredictable flowering weather, and more frequent potentially damaging heat spikes in summer and during harvest.” He went on to say that “we have now reached the point where an isolated three-to-five-day heat spike can overwhelm the initial four or five months of the vine’s interaction with its site and largely dictate wine style for the entire season, especially if this heat comes immediately before or during harvest. This leads to wines of weather rather than wines of site, a critical difference, and it’s particularly distressing when one has a site with such distinctive natural identity, which then becomes homogenized or suppressed by these events.”

In Smith’s later years at Larkmead and especially since Petroski took over, work in the vineyards and winery has been focused on alleviating the worst effects of heat. Among other measures, the estate began using green shade cloth in 2011 to provide the grapes with a measure of protection from the sun. Petroski also told me that Larkmead has cut total irrigation of its vineyards in half, through more precise additions—i. e., adding more water when it’s most needed but watering much less frequently. According to Smith, whom I spoke to recently for this article, this step has enabled the estate to get riper fruit at somewhat lower sugar levels since 2006.

During his last years at Larkmead, Smith was harvesting earlier and Petroski has continued this process in an attempt to reduce alcohol levels in the wines. (The Solari Cabernet in particular has ranged between 15% and 15.7% alcohol in most vintages, but has been a bit lower—between 14.2% and 15.3%—since 2013.) Picking earlier at lower Brix levels—around 24 degrees Brix since 2017, but a bit higher for the earlier-ripening Merlot—has also enabled Petroski to avoid getting “dead fruit.” Said Petroski: “We’re harvesting now when the grapes are at their highest energy level—before the skins and seeds start to break down. We’re no longer getting raisins and nowadays we barely have to sort the fruit.” Of course, Petroski added,



picking high-energy grapes means picking “at peak tannins,” before the skins break down and make softer wines, so this strategy brings with it its own set of challenges to tame the potentially more rustic tannins.

#### EVOLVING WINEMAKING TECHNIQUES

My tasting made it clear that some of the wines from the early years (i.e., prior to 2005), though very rich, dark and glossy in the early going, did not possess the verve of more recent vintages. They were actually considerably lower in total polyphenols and tannins than today’s vintages, and the vertical tasting revealed more evidence of irregular ripening, including obvious hints of dehydrated fruit (and warm, liqueur-like fruit character, if not incipient oxidation) as well as some distinct green notes that now seem more intrusive than those of more recent vintages. Smith told me that in the early years the vines suffered mightily from stress, which extended the period between bloom and harvest. “Back then the vines were limping to the finish line at the end,” he said. Nowadays the vineyards benefit from steadier photosynthesis, and the typical time between flowering and harvest has been cut from as much as 130 days to around 113.

It’s worth noting that until Larkmead opened its new winery in time to vinify the 2005 harvest, the wines suffered from “winery stress” as well: Larkmead made its wines at Napa Wine Company through the 2004 vintage and had no choice but to do much quicker “flash fermentations” back then, according to Petroski. Nowadays the cuvaison for these wines lasts about three weeks. But the wines have been consistently better since 2005 and have been elevated to an even higher level starting in 2009.

Petroski ferments his wines in stainless steel tanks, giving them an initial cold soak lasting five to eight days (shorter if he chooses to inoculate the musts and longer if he vinifies with native yeasts). Once there’s a presence of yeasts, he micro-oxygenates the wines, without aeration, by doing two to four automated pumpovers per day, “mostly to normalize temperature,” during the active part of the fermentation, which typically lasts around ten days. When the fermentation reaches its peak, Petroski cools the tanks to 85 degrees F.; back in 2006, he told me, fermentation temperatures typically rose to 88 to 90. Petroski normally limits any post-fermentation maceration to just two or three days, explaining, “that’s enough; we’re a tannic, structured site.” Interestingly, Petroski described Smith’s early vintages as “more about polish and easy drinkability,” at least compared to his own recent wines, which he finds to be “more rugged, and often tougher for tasters in early blind tastings.”

While Smith aged his first vintages of the Solari Reserve and LMV Salon in 100% new oak, he rapidly reduced that percentage to about 75%, where it remains today. The Solari Cabernet was initially aged in a higher percentage of Demptos barrels, but Petroski has moved to mostly Darnajou since 2012, which he believes brings out a hint of herbaceousness in the wine that contributes freshness. The LMV, on the other hand, began in mostly Darnajou but Petroski switched to mostly Demptos since 2012, “to bring out the



wine's fruit sweetness." Prior to 2012, both wines were aged in medium-plus or even heavy-toast barrels, but Petroski now uses medium toast to lessen the impact of the wood.

Both the Solari and the LMV Salon have always been bottled after 18 to 20 months in barrel, in late spring or early summer. The bottling is done with a light filtration ("We have hard water up here so the wines are turbid," noted Petroski), but only the 2006 vintage was fined ("We were all shocked at its tannins"). Through the years, the winemakers have been willing to add water to facilitate the fermentations as well as to acidify lightly in the ripest years as needed, but Petroski told me he discontinued water additions and acidification as of vintage 2014, as the recent work in the vineyards and the selection of harvest dates have brought lower potential alcohol levels and better-balanced fruit.

Tannin levels in recent vintages have been higher than ever, but then the red wines from this site rely more on their tannins than on their acidity for structure. In fact, Petroski noted that the site's ability to produce wines with pHs up to 4.0 that still maintain freshness is largely a function of the strong tannins, and of course of the site's mix of soils. Petroski noted that he stopped adding press wine to his top cuvées after 2011 (in fairness, Smith rarely used press wine for the Solari or LMV Salon) as he thought that this was diluting the tannic structure of his wines. "Now they are more robust," he claimed. Indeed, today's wines are better than ever, and the Solari and LMV Salon bottlings look capable of evolving in bottle for 20 to 25 years.



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VINTAGE	NAME	TASTING NOTES	SCORE
2015	Solari	Bright dark red with ruby tones. Aromas of raspberry liqueur, tobacco and licorice complicated by subtle soil tones. Juicy, spicy and concentrated; surprisingly alive for its high pH, with its red and darker fruit flavors complemented by menthol and soil notes and lifted by minerality. Very Cabernet but not in a particularly black style. Finishes with firm tannic grip and excellent length. (14.5% alcohol; 3.98 pH)	93+
2015	LMV Salon	Bright medium ruby. Muscier and less exuberant on the nose than the 2015 Solari; a bit lower-toned. Shows excellent punch if not quite the personality and early sex appeal of the Solari, with its plum and spice flavors underpinned by minerality. Not quite the early balance of the Solari, as the wine's serious spine of acids and tannins will require patience. Ultimately a bit drier on the back half. (14.9% alcohol)	92+
2014	Solari	Lucid red-ruby. Sexy aromas of brambly raspberry, clove and tobacco are lifted and enlivened by notes of flowers and mint. Then densely packed and sweet, offering palate-saturating flavors of dark fruits and smoky herbs. This very long, lively wine finishes with integrated, building tannins that turned a bit dustier with air. Winemaker Petroski noted that the warm nights during the summer of 2014 meant that the vines were "constantly moving" and never really shut down. The harvest, he went on, was very early (9/12) but 2015 was even earlier (9/4). (15.3% alcohol)	92+
2014	LMV Salon	Full ruby-red. Wonderfully complex nose melds red fruits and dried herbs, with the floral Cabernet Franc element adding aromatic lift. Concentrated and sharply delineated, with its very pure red fruit, spice and floral flavors displaying a restrained sweetness. Really lovely depth of flavor here. Finishes with firm, spreading tannins that avoid coming off as dry. This wine is the highest in total polyphenols of all of the LMV Salon vintages but does not come across as overly tannic. Very impressive! Winemaker Petroski added that 2014 and 2013 yielded wines with "the biggest tannins," noting that the '14s "may have more energy." (15.3% alcohol)	94+
2013	Solari	Deep red-ruby. Pure if somewhat brooding scents of raspberry, currant, licorice and tobacco. Concentrated and tightly wound, showing darker mid-palate fruit than the 2014 Solari as well as considerable power. But there's no shortage of sweetness here. This beauty spreads out to saturate the palate without leaving any impression of heaviness. The red fruit element returns on the ripely tannic finish, which displays lovely retronasal lift, belying its very high pH. This should last very well. Winemaker Petroski described 2013 as "the granddaddy of all vintages, with no soil stress, no heat spikes, no Indian summer." He summarized: "We made our most powerful wines ever." This wine was the highest in total polyphenols of all of the bottles in my double vertical and yet its huge tannins are remarkably integrated. (15.1% alcohol; the highest in pH of all the wines in my double-vertical tasting at 4.1)	94+





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VINTAGE	NAME	TASTING NOTES	SCORE
2013	LMV Salon	Dark ruby-red. A bit more liqueur-like and subdued on the nose than the Solari, and blacker in its fruit character. Powerful and thick yet somehow juicy as well, showing greater density of texture but less aromatic definition and detail than the 2013 Solari. Its slightly liqueur-like cherry cola and spice flavors were initially overshadowed by a musky oak element but aeration brought a suaver mouthfeel and building sweetness. Still, this is a less fruity style of wine than the 2013 Solari. Boasts a powerful spine, although the wine's substantial granular tannins arrive late. This wine is in an awkward stage right now and will require patience. (15.6% alcohol)	92+
2012	Solari	Bright ruby-red; not quite as saturated as earlier vintages of this bottling. Distinctly dark aromas of black cherry, licorice and menthol went into a shell with aeration. Fat, thick and sweet if a bit youthfully monolithic; in a distinctly powerful style and even a tad warm on the end but not especially tannic. According to Petroski, 2012 was "a higher-yield year with a very hot August; 21 straight days after veraison with afternoon temperatures above 101 resulted in slow-cooked fruit." But the harvest did not take place until the first week of October and "the long hang time broke down the skins and resulted in lower tannin levels." Today this is most impressive for its breadth and length, but it needs time. (15.5% alcohol)	92+
2012	LMV Salon	Good dark red. Redcurrant, cherry, mocha and spices on the nose. In a powerful style like the 2012 Solari but creamier and more luscious, perhaps due in part to the addition of 33% Cabernet Franc, the highest percentage for the estate to this point. This wine really fills the mouth while avoiding heaviness. Finishes very long and nicely delineated, with harmonious tannins. As with the 2012 Solari, total polyphenols were considerably lower than in most recent vintages, but none of these wines lack for tannic support. (15.4% alcohol)	93+
2010	Solari	Good dark red-ruby. Knockout nose melds black raspberry, mocha, licorice and sexy soil tones, with some very ripe suggestions leavened by dried sage and lavender nuances. Wonderfully sweet yet fresh, with its plush, fine-grained flavors of raspberry, cherry, plum and mocha given shape by perfectly integrated acidity. Finishes with firm but harmonious tannins and terrific rising length. The wine's sweetness is nicely buffered on the back end by an impression of medicinal reserve, but more in a red cherry way than black. This wine was tightly wound when I originally tasted it from bottle but it's evolving beautifully and could provide great pleasure now with some aeration. Outstanding Cabernet Sauvignon, and a beautiful expression of its site. Incidentally, the winery did not produce their special top-of-the-line Lark bottling in 2010 as yields were so low, so that juice went into the Solari. (15.7% alcohol; harvested on October 13)	96



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VINTAGE	NAME	TASTING NOTES	SCORE
2010	LMV Salon	Bright dark red. A bit darker and more claret-like on the nose than the 2010 Solari, offering aromas of black raspberry, black pepper, graphite, leather and smoky oak along with a subtle herbal element. Densely packed, broad and thick, displaying vibrant peppery lift to its highly concentrated flavors of dark raspberry, cherry and spices. Aeration brought a building floral perfume. A wine of great finesse, featuring broad tannins that dust the front teeth and a slowly building whiplash of a finish. This is actually significantly higher in total polyphenols than the 2010 Solari (due to the Petit Verdot component?) and can't quite match that wine for nobility of tannins, but I'm splitting hairs as this is a spectacular vintage in which Larkmead's distinctive terroir is manifest in its wines. (Incidentally, Larkmead did not make a Solari or LMV Salon from the very cool, humid growing season of 2011; only Malbec and Petit Verdot were harvested before the worst of the late-season rainfall.) (15.4% alcohol)	95
2009	Solari	Dark red with ruby tones. Aromas of black raspberry, kirsch, mocha and graphite are lifted by a strong floral topnote and complicated by some oaky torrefaction. Plush, rich and deep, with its concentrated black fruit flavors currently muted by a medicinal menthol element. Plenty of texture and sweetness here but the wine is in a somewhat monolithic stage today. The building tannins currently cut off the wine's fruit a bit on the slightly aggressive finish. This bottle suffered by being tasted after the pair of 2010s but its underlying rocky minerality suggests that there's much more to come. Incidentally, Larkmead finished harvesting by the end of September in 2009 and thus escaped the impact of the rainstorms in early October. (15.6% alcohol)	93
2009	LMV Salon	Saturated ruby-red. Aromas of exotic dark berries, graphite, licorice and menthol are lifted by a minty element. Impressively dense in the mouth, even a bit liqueur-like, conveying a sexy creaminess to its flavors of cassis, black raspberry, chocolate and menthol; the wine's small Merlot component comes through loud and clear. Perhaps a bit more medicinal and less consistently ripe than the '09 Solari but finishes chocolatey and long, with smooth tannins. (15.6% alcohol)	92
2008	Solari	Healthy dark ruby-red. Aromas of blackberry, dark raspberry, coffee and violet reminded me of a wine from Saint-Emilion. Not large-scaled but intensely flavored and suave, with its dark berry and dried cranberry flavors accented by Vermouth-like herbal complexity. This wine delivers the creaminess of the vintage's better examples. Finishes with smooth, nicely buffered tannins that saturate the teeth. Easygoing and perfect to drink now, this wine should go on for a while on its balance and underlying gravelly minerality. Two thousand eight is a perfect example of how this hot site can excel in less-heralded vintages. (15.2% alcohol; 4.01 pH)	93
2008	LMV Salon	Bright, deep ruby-red. Complex nose melds black raspberry, licorice, tobacco leaf, truffley underbrush and herbs with strong oak notes of coffee and mocha. Thick, seamless, slightly exotic wine with a fine-grained texture and a strong measure of sexy oak. Finishes with broad, dusty but sweet tannins and very good length. Some very ripe notes and exotic oakiness here but it works. This creamy wine is probably at its peak right now. (15.2% alcohol)	92



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VINTAGE	NAME	TASTING NOTES	SCORE
2007	Solari	Dark red with ruby tones. Sexy if restrained aromas of blackberry, raspberry, tobacco and coffee, complicated by dusty soil tones and an obvious oak element. Then considerably more open in the mouth, offering highly complex, fine-grained flavors of raspberry, dusty herbs and chocolatey oak. At once creamy and light on its feet, this wonderfully savory wine boasts an utterly silky texture. Finishes energetic and suave, with relatively light, melting tannins and sneaky mounting length. My style of Cabernet. Happily, the wine's 10% Petit Verdot component (the two varieties were co-fermented) was not at all overripe in 2007. (15.5% alcohol)	94
2007	LMV Salon	Good dark red with ruby highlights. Distinctly blacker and more medicinal on the nose than the 2007 Solari, showing obvious Cabernet Franc notes of blueberry, licorice, pepper and herbs. Then intensely flavored, chewy and concentrated, but without quite the complexity or class of the Solari. The wine's dark berry and licorice flavors are complicated by an element of almost salty minerality. This, too, is low in tannins; but Petroski noted that both '07s actually began a bit spiky but showed a finer grain and harmonized nicely with aeration. Savory rather than sweet, this wine should continue to evolve in bottle. (15.5% alcohol)	93\2
2006	Solari	Dark red with ruby tones. A bit deeper-pitched on the nose than the 2007 Solari, with aromas of black raspberry, mocha, coffee and graphite joined by an element of exotic spices. Then surprisingly lush and creamy on the palate, displaying a slightly liqueur-like raspberry ripeness lifted by baking spices and a sexy floral quality. Powerful and horizontal, and yet there's something ethereal and Nebbiolo-like going on here. The 2006 growing season brought considerably higher total polyphenols and tannins than 2007 but the tannins hit the palate late and the finish builds slowly, with captivating winter spices emerging. This wine was fined but I never would have guessed that. (15.3% alcohol)	93
2006	LMV Salon	Good dark red-ruby. Less high-toned than the '06 Solari. Aromas of black raspberry, dark cherry, mocha and licorice show less of the spicy high tones of the '06 Solari. In a rather powerful style, like the Solari, with dark fruit, graphite and licorice flavors dominating. Here the tannins come across as a bit rough but still supported by the wine's strong fruit and extract. Less suave than the Solari but softened considerably with aeration, showing an attractive sweetness and emerging soil tones. (15.5% alcohol)	91
2005	Solari	Good dark red-ruby. Less high-toned than the '06 Solari. Aromas of black raspberry, dark cherry, mocha and licorice show less of the spicy high tones of the '06 Solari. In a rather powerful style, like the Solari, with dark fruit, graphite and licorice flavors dominating. Here the tannins come across as a bit rough but still supported by the wine's strong fruit and extract. Less suave than the Solari but softened considerably with aeration, showing an attractive sweetness and emerging soil tones. (15.5% alcohol)	91
2005	LMV Salon	Good dark red, but without the ruby tones of the '05 Solari. Musky, meaty scents of black raspberry, coffee and iron-like minerality; some almost Burgundian funk here. Fat, sweet and accessible; more Pinot- than Cabernet-like in its pliancy of texture, perhaps owing to its Merlot component. This wine is technically the lowest of all of these in total polyphenols and tannins and yet a fine coating of tannins saturates the tongue and palate. Current winemaker Petroski noted that some 2006 was back-blended into the '05s to give those wines, made from what he described as "a huge crop," a bit more structure. He noted that he selected "one rough parcel of 2006, spreading it out over the winery's '05s." (15.4% alcohol)	92



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VINTAGE	NAME	TASTING NOTES	SCORE
2004	Solari	Medium red. Roasted aromas of dark berries, plum, black cherry, truffle and chocolate show a hint of incipient oxidation. Large-scaled, thick and a bit aggressive--from the earliest harvest for Larkmead until 2014. Plenty of sweetness here to buffer the wine's slightly drying tannins. Finishes with an impressive blast of black cherry. I had a much firmer and more mineral sample of this wine as part of my 2004 Napa Cabernet horizontal tasting in 2015, but this bottle is fully evolved. (16.2% alcohol)	90
2004	LMV Salon	Dark red color is more vibrant than that of the '04 Solari Reserve. Very ripe, slightly high-toned aromas of raspberry, graphite, mocha, coffee and tobacco. Very smooth, fat and thick, conveying a liqueur-like warmth to its raspberry and plum flavors; notes of licorice and exotic spices emerge with aeration. A bit longer than the Solari Reserve but aggressive as well, finishing with tongue-clenching tannins that turned increasingly dry in the glass. (15.7% alcohol)	90
2003	Solari	Good dark red. Aromas of cherry, herbs and rose petal suggest a wide range of ripeness. Nicely concentrated and savory but slightly medicinal and clenched, with the wine's acidity coming across as a bit sour and disjointed. A wine of modest texture and depth, finishing with a faint bitter edge. There were still some older vines here in 2003 but they were diseased "and not necessarily better," according to Petroski, and former winemaker Andy Smith noted that the vines in 2003 were "out of balance all year following spring frost." This wine and the 2003 LMV Salon are carrying a full seven grams per liter of acidity, mostly likely due to a combination of some underripe fruit and some acidification. Two thousand three was an awkward growing season here, noted Petroski, "and the wines are awkward in the glass today." He added: "The Solari doesn't taste like Larkmead." (15.5% alcohol)	88
2003	LMV Salon	Good dark red with no sign of amber. Complex aromas of raspberry, cherry, spices, flowers, minerals, licorice and dried herbs, with a faint dusty note that calls to mind a mature Right Bank Bordeaux. Juicy and savory on the palate, with dark fruit and chocolate flavors complicated by a distinct saline element. A step up in texture and harmoniousness from the Solari Reserve, this wine finishes with good grip and length. It shares the high acidity of the Solari Reserve and is actually lower in pH (3.74 vs. 3.87) but is far more enjoyable today. (15.5% alcohol)	90
2002	Solari	Dark red. Very ripe aromas of dark raspberry, chocolate and mocha, plus a suggestion of prune. Very ripe, sweet and thick--in fact, downright huge--but dominated by a dehydrated fruit character. Still fun to drink for its mouthfilling texture but lacking in definition and nuance and past its peak. (15.7% alcohol)	89