



Top Napa Valley wines of 2015



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Once again, the St. Helena Star/Napa Valley Vintners panelists gathered, nearly every month, to taste, rank and discuss the wide range of wines made in the Napa Valley, from cabernet to chardonnay, from rosé to wines made from heritage grapes.

As in the past, the panel included winemakers, assistant winemakers, retailers and others in the wine trade, invited for each month's tastings, which are held in the Rudd Center at the Culinary Institute of America at Greystone.

Leading the group for the St. Helena Star is Editor David Stoneberg; for the Napa Valley Vintners, the leader is Cate Conniff, communications manager; Traci Dutton is the coordinator for the CIA at Greystone.

The following is a list of wines the panelists chose as their top wines for each tasting.

Cabs to love

Winemaking in Napa Valley is not for the faint of wallet. At roughly \$6,000 a ton for cabernet sauvignon grapes, it is a game not everyone is prepared to play. The consistent, premium quality of the region's grapes keeps the demand and costs high, leading to some pretty hefty price tags for the wines. More than \$100 a bottle is not a scarcity.

In January, the panelists sat down to review the other Napa Valley: cabernet sauvignon wines priced at \$50 and less.

Top 2010, 2011, 2012 cabernet sauvignons

Amici Cellars 2010 (\$45)

Silenus Winery 2010 (\$45)

Atalon Winery's 2011 (\$40)

Silverado Vineyards Stags Leap Estate 2011 (\$48)

Franciscan Estate 2012 (\$28)

Paoletti Estates Winery 2012 Bella Novello (\$36)

Reynolds Family Winery 2012 (\$48)

Rombauer Vineyards 2012 (\$50)

Wines for enjoying sunny skies

Rosé wines are the olive branch of the wine industry. They share the refreshing nature of white wines, yet with the flavors of red. While rosé may be the salve on arguments about whether it's red or white with dinner, this is just one of the benefits the style can boast.

Rosé wines pair with light and rich foods: from shrimp salad to barbecue chicken to pasta in a heavy cream sauce. You won't pay what you do for red wines in most cases, and Napa Valley vintners are giving rosés some serious attention, making them better than ever before.

Rosé comes in many styles. There are darker-colored, fuller-bodied versions with tannins for those who might have trouble letting go of their red wine fetish. Lighter, moderate-alcohol rosés exist for the week-weary, whose sole goal is to spend a sunny afternoon poolside flicking water with their toes.

Top 2013-2014 Rosés

Jericho Canyon Vineyard 2013 Rosé, Calistoga (\$35)

Tournesol 2013 Pinot Noir, Coombsville (\$35)

Benessere 2014 Sangiovese Rosato, St. Helena (\$18)

Boyd Family Vineyards 2014 Ruby Tuesday Rosé, Oak Knoll District (\$23)

Pine Ridge Vineyards 2014 Rosé Encantado (\$24)

Saintsbury 2014 Pinot Noir Vincent Vin Gris, Los Carneros (\$20)

Sauvignon blanc is the all-season grape. Sort of.

Sauvignon blanc is an all-weather wine. In the heat of the summer, its zesty, fruity character is a welcome refreshment. Come fall and winter, it is the go-to wine for fresh Dungeness crab. Yet despite the variety's seasonal flexibility, there is no denying that spring triggers an almost primal desire for its wines.

Sauvignon blanc is the wine equivalent of throwing up the window sash and letting in fresh air and tingling breezes. It is the wine that most expresses our excitement that spring has returned once again.

2013, 2014 sauvignon blancs

BRYTER Estates 2013, Rutherford (\$32)

Cornerstone Cellars 2013 (\$30)

Malk Family Vineyards 2013, Oak Knoll District (\$29.50)

Montgomery Vineyard 2013 (\$18)

Cliff Lede Vineyards 2014 (\$25)

Eleven Eleven 2014, Rutherford (\$35)

Salvestrin 2014 LeBlanc Crystal Springs Vineyard, St. Helena (\$24)

Swanson Vineyards 2014, Oakville (\$35)

Twomey Cellars 2014 (\$25)

Chardonnay still stealing our hearts

Chardonnay stole our American hearts in the late 1960s and '70s and has been the top grape since. The grape's charm is not necessarily in its aromatics; its signature aromas as well as flavors are created more through winemaking choices in the cellar. Its malleability is one of its finest attributes.

One of the major style influences of chardonnay wines is the presence of oak-related flavors from barrel fermentation and/or aging of the wines in oak barrels. The first California chardonnays were made to mimic white Burgundies (refreshing acidity, integrated oak-influenced flavors).

Once Napa embraced its inner warm climate, the popular style turned to riper wines with generous fruit dominated by buttery, vanilla and spicy oak flavors. A trend for more fruit-focused and non-oaked chardonnays emerged in the last several years, with some producers making both non-oaked and oaked styles today.

Top 2012, 2013 chardonnays

Robert Mondavi Winery 2012 Reserve, Los Carneros (\$40)

Baldacci Family Vineyards "Sorelle" 2013, Los Carneros (\$38)

Clif Family Winery 2013, Oak Knoll District (\$32)

Darioush 2013 (\$43)

Frank Family Vineyards 2013, Carneros (\$35)

Unlocking the secrets of un-oaked chardonnay

Un-oaked, non-oaked, oak-free, stainless, naked and neutral: These are all terms used to imply the same thing in the wine world: a wine that is not dominated by the flavors that come from oak use in wine production.

For its July tasting, the St. Helena Star and Napa Valley Vintners Tasting Panel reviewed a selection of 14 un-oaked chardonnay wines from the Napa Valley across three vintages: 2012, 2013 and 2014.

While un-oaked chardonnay is not a new phenomenon, the style is gaining favor in the market. Longtime panelist Jac Cole of Hindsight Wines, returning from a brief hiatus on the panel, provided his ever-insightful thoughts: "There is an accepted norm for oaked chardonnay wines, yet the door is wide open for un-oaked styles."

Cole shared that when he encounters consumers who say they dislike chardonnay, he has them taste a non-oaked version. Many realize it is the oak flavors they dislike, not chardonnay itself.

Top un-oaked chardonnay

Alpha Omega 2013 Unoaked Chardonnay (\$44)

Laura Michael Wine-Zahtila Vineyards 2014 Chardonnay (\$22)

Cairdean 2013 Unoaked Chardonnay (\$35)

Silverado Vineyards 2013 Vineburg Chardonnay Los Carneros (\$30)

Examining unique reds and whites

The St. Helena Star and Napa Valley Vintners Tasting Panel took a look at wines made from heritage grapes in its August tasting at the Culinary Institute of America at Greystone. Heritage grapes are those historically mentioned in publications and heavily planted or having the largest reported tonnages long before chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon climbed up the grape ladder.

Top grapes up through the 1970s were instead chenin blanc, riesling, French colombard, muscat, zinfandel and petite sirah, among others.

Top heritage grape wines

Galerie 2014 Terracea Riesling Spring Mountain (\$25)

Pope Valley Winery 2014 Reserve Chenin Blanc (\$32)

Larkmead Vineyards 2013 White Blend (Tocai Friulano) Calistoga (\$45)

Gamble Family Vineyards 2012 Heritage Sites Red Blend (\$35)

Frank Family Vineyards 2012 Zinfandel (\$36.75)

Napa Valley pinot noir ups its game

The one grape, the two words, “pinot noir,” evoke heavy emotions in the wine world. Some would beg, borrow and steal to taste the ethereal, earthy nature of the world’s best pinot noirs.

When pinot noir shines, it creates some of the most intriguing wines in the world. In a Mediterranean climate like Napa Valley, the grapes ripen with a full spectrum of aromatic red fruit aromas and flavors. The color of the wines are deeper, especially when the grape skins, which provide the color in a wine, are left in contact with the juice for longer periods before or during fermentation. This extended skin contact also adds tannic structure, helping the wines to age. Add to that the climate mitigating ocean breezes and fog that maintain acidity in the grapes, and thus the wine, and we end up with the ultimate triumvirate: full flavor, freshness and age-ability.

Top pinot noirs from 2012 and 2013

Michael Mondavi Family 2012 Isabel Mondavi Pinot Noir, Carneros (\$50)

Paul Hobbs 2013 Hyde Vineyards, Los Carneros (\$75)

Starmont Winery 2013 Pinot Noir, Los Carneros (\$27)

Baldacci Family Vineyards 2012 Elizabeth Pinot Noir, Los Carneros (\$65)

Frank Family Vineyards 2013 Lewis Carneros Reserve, Los Carneros (\$65)

Artesa Vineyards & Winery 2013 Estate Reserve (\$40)

Star/NVV panelists judge petite sirah, syrah

Cabernet sauvignon had nothing on petite sirah in the late 1800s in Napa Valley. It was petite sirah, among numerous other varietals, that dominated red grape plantings at the time. Some of these early petite sirah plantings were likely syrah instead; grape identification was not the science it is today. Historically, these grapes were blended together in what are called field blends. The varieties did not get a chance to shine on their own.

Yet, here we are in 2015, and these wines have taken a fierce stance. They are staying in the Napa Valley — and they are better than ever. The thick oak-flavored cloaks that the wines used to wear have been shed; and some of the alcohol or tannin imbalances that existed in these wines have been massaged, with a revised focus on the complex fruit flavors that each of these grapes can provide.

Top Syrah/Rhone blend wines

Broman Cellars, 2013 Proprietary Red Blend (\$36)

PEJU, 2012 Syrah (\$38)

Rocca Family Vineyards, 2013 Syrah, Atlas Peak (\$40)

Quixote Winery, 2012 Petite Sirah, Stag's Leap District (\$75)

Sparkling and sweet for the holidays

The 2015 holiday season is upon us with convivial celebrations and gatherings of family and friends. It's the perfect time of year to pull out special wines for celebration, lingering conversations, and to ward off winter's evening chill. Sparkling, dessert and fortified wines have long held their place at the holiday table, giving us all the more reason to make merry with bubbles and bottles of liquid gold and velvet.

Top sparkling, late harvest, fortified dessert wines

Alpha Omega 2011 Late Harvest Dessert Wine (\$88)

Honig Vineyard and Winery 2013 Late Harvest Sauvignon Blanc (\$70)

Schramsberg Vineyards 2010 Brut (\$75)

Schramsberg Vineyards 2011 Querencia Brut Rosé (\$55)

Somerston Estate 2009 Everest Fortified Red Wine (\$30)

Catherine Bugue, the Star's tasting panel columnist, loves writing about — and drinking — wine. You can contact Catherine at catbugue@gmail.com. Only wines from Napa Valley

Vintner member wineries are accepted and tasted. Many wineries offer local residents discounts on their wines through the Napa Neighbor program; visit napavintners.com/programs and click on Napa Neighbor to learn more.