

PUNCH

A Guide to the Current State of California Cabernet

Jon Bonné checks in on California cabernet—from Napa to the Santa Cruz Mountains—and selects the bottles that best represent its present.

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Last week, we [considered California cabernet franc](#), discovering that a new and evocative era for that wine has arrived. Franc is a wonderful way to experience California, for Thanksgiving or otherwise. But the time has come to consider the main event: California cabernet sauvignon.

For sure, this isn't a wine we often think about at PUNCH. But when you consider wine in an American context, California cabernet is as defining as it gets. Which is why it's easy to forget how polarizing it can be. It is a Gatsby of a wine, into which we alternately pour our aspirations for the good life, or our gripes—about an overkill of style and the dark lining of new money. Those have been the major drivers of a recent era of cabernet, and none for the better.

That's honestly a lot of baggage to drop on a grape. And as time has gone on—and, after having beaten up on a lot of overwrought cabernets over the years—I've become a reluctant defender. Cabernet sauvignon at its best has a distinct beauty and power, when not burnished with makeup or laden with too many egoist aspirations. You encounter it in modest Bordeaux, in Italian examples like Montesecondo's Rosso del Rospo, in Australian versions from Coonawarra.

And yes, from California, too. It's not coincidence that there's been a recent raft of interest in tasting the California cabernets of the 1960s and 1970s; they came from an era when cabernet was allowed to have sharp elbows and forward acidity, and didn't need to gush over your tongue with a wave of overripe fruit. Most importantly, they had in spades what gives cabernet its wonderful singularity: the complexity of not only fruit, but its many savory aspects. That's code for the grape's herbal flavors, which have caused no end of fighting. Sure, those flavors can fall too far to the green side, which comes across as vegetal and astringent. But they are also [intrinsic to cabernet's identity](#). Get rid of the herb, and you've killed the grape's spirit.

There's no question that California cabernet has evolved in the past few years, or, more precisely, revisited a classic style of earlier years, when savory and herbaceous characteristics were admired. This is part of the general push in California wine toward the new—a move back to the future. If just four years ago cabernet lagged in this trend, it's undoubtedly happening today.

It's even happening in the Napa Valley, which remains California's cabernet epicenter. As hard as it was to witness [October's wildfires](#), they also got me thinking once again about the things that are so special about that part of California. And as much as my love for that slice of wine country is complicated—namely because Napa doesn't usually do humility well—my love for California cabernet in its classic form remains as strong as ever.

It always resurges at this time of year. I've heard every side of the argument about cabernet and Thanksgiving—that it's too strong for turkey, or not fruity enough for the many sweet flavors on the table. Thing is, Thanksgiving is defined by rich food with lots of butter and fat, and the roasted, deep flavors of autumn, all of which cabernet is perfect for. It's a great Thanksgiving wine, maybe for the second or third bottle, when there's gravitas to flavors on the table and you slip into what the Italians like to call a "contemplative mode."

This led us to one of our most curious tastings at PUNCH. Perhaps my years in California prepared me for what was to come, but my colleagues less so. The culprits were the usual culprits in tasting California cabernet: too much alcohol, a bombast of fruit, flavors that seemed roasted or burnt or just plain awkward. It revealed, perhaps, the identity crisis that saddles cabernet today: Its biggest fans during the previous maximalist era endorsed the very things that stop making it true cabernet (namely, that green streak). They demanded more of everything. And, crucially, they were willing to pay a lot for it. The result? An emerging generation of drinkers that has largely stayed away from California cab, if not for style then for price. It was a recipe, frankly, for creating a lot of haters.

If this tasting was any indication, that battle continues. Even among some names I sentimentally love, there was plenty of more-is-more. But there also is a lot of beautiful cabernet to be found, both among classicists who resisted the desire to change—people like Cathy Corison and Philip Togni—and those who want to find a middle ground.

That's why Napa ended up faring quite well in our tasting. At the same time, we're also sensitive to price at PUNCH, and so we suggested a good number of alternatives from up and down the state. Sonoma, Santa Barbara and especially the Santa Cruz Mountains—home to Ridge Monte Bello, which for my money remains *the* iconic American wine—are places where beautiful cabernet can be found.

Of course, there are plenty of other cabernets to appreciate, including its aromatic progenitor, franc. But now is most certainly a time to keep California in mind. And whether you love or hate cabernet, it's the perfect time to be thankful for this grape—and its role in paving the way for American wine.

THE CLASSIC | TIE

Snowden Vineyards The Ranch Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon

It's always surprising the Snowden wines tend to fly under the radar; the Snowden family (and its property in the eastern hills of Rutherford) are Napa denizens, and the wines are made by Diana Snowden Seysses, who, when not cabernet-ing is in Burgundy as cellar master for Morey-Saint-Denis' well-known Domaine Dujac, which is owned by her husband's family. This is the Snowdens' mainline cabernet, and once it gets some air, it finds a perfect balance between heft (it's pushing 15 percent alcohol) and subtlety, with fresh and quiet fruit flavors, dried leaves and smokiness, plus a silken aspect to the often rugged cabernet tannins, which is Snowden Seysses' trademark—a Burgundian eye on a very non-Burgundian grape.

- **Price:** \$45
- **Vintage:** 2014

Philip Togni Tanbark Hill Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon

Philip Togni, similarly, has managed to stay off Napa's fame carousel, although those who know history know that he is responsible for some of the valley's greatest wines, including the 1969 Chappellet cabernet. The style can be unrepentantly old-fashioned, with lots of acid and lots of tannin. But Tanbark Hill, the family's second label, is relatively easy to approach young. (Philip's daughter, Lisa Togni, is taking over winemaking and polishing the edges on her father's famously uncompromising style.)

Still, this is cabernet for those who don't want training wheels. That acidity and food-friendly astringency are, in effect, coming through as black licorice to accent the tart blackcurrant flavors. It's a growling, tough mountain cabernet, but decant it and try it over a couple of hours and you see the full magnitude of cabernet in its classic form.

See also: White Rock, Corison, Matthiasson, Neyers Conn Valley, Rickshaw

- **Price:** \$50
- **Vintage:** 2014

THE LIGHTNING ROD

Dunn Vineyards Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon

The Dunn wines, even more than Togni, are total you-in-or-you-out propositions. Randy Dunn has made his career on tannic, hard wines that chase away those seeking easygoing cabernet. (But, if you're seeking easygoing cabernet, you're doing it all wrong.) The wines can be rock hard when young, although this current bottle from a top Napa vintage is just ripe enough, and perhaps kinder and gentler than Duns of years past—maybe because Randy's son Mike is taking on more winemaking. It still shows lots of profound tannin, along with iodine and autumn leaves and soy, but is fully formed and flat-out delicious, so long as you're okay with some structure.

See also: Mayacamas Vineyards

- **Price:** \$110
- **Vintage:** 2013

THE OUTLIER | TIE

Enfield Waterhorse Ridge Fort Ross-Seaview Cabernet Sauvignon

John Lockwood does more subtle varieties so well—including chardonnay and syrah—that it's hard to admit that we wish he made *a lot* more cabernet. This comes from nowhere near cabernet country: a parcel right at the edge of the Pacific Ocean, specifically in pinot noir territory. (Vineyards like Flowers and Hirsch are nearby.) Once again, this is one of our favorite cabs in a long time. It's more distinctly mineral and intense than Enfield's previous efforts, but there's so much nuance: a kelp-like marine side, quiet tobacco aromas, subtle plum fruit and a remarkable sense of silken texture and nuance. This should be a case study in how cabernet can speak softly.

- **Price:** \$68
- **Vintage:** 2014

Ridge Estate Santa Cruz Mountains Cabernet Sauvignon

Ridge's Estate bottle continues to be one of the best values in California cab—a way to taste the Ridge style without paying for the epic Montebello (which, if you have \$200, go for the 2014). This is atypical, in that it comes from the mountains above Silicon Valley, about 45 miles south of San Francisco (high above Apple's futuristic donut, basically). Yet this is also one of the most historic spots for cabernet in the state, dating to the late 1800s. The Estate is especially ripe and friendly in 2014, with just a touch of leafiness but a big whack of almost jammy black fruit, plus that quintessential mineral tang that defines Santa Cruz Mountains' wine. It's a case study in California tradition.

See also: Notary Public, Folkway

- **Price:** \$55
- **Vintage:** 2014