Connoisseurs' Guide to California Wine

April is a month in which we revisit California's ongoing efforts with the classic Bordelais red varieties, and, while Cabernet Sauvignon remains the unquestioned leader in the field and the state's most iconic red wine of them all, there are more than a few Merlots and Cabernet Francs in addition to a handful of Malbecs and Petit Verdots that bear watching. The rise, seeming fall and subsequent rise in so-called "cult" Cabernets testifies to the resilience and absolute quality of our home-grown renditions, and the simple fact that there are so many collectable, world-class offerings competing for consumer attention signals that the variety has lost none of its sheen. The number of highly rated wines in recent issues of CGCW is striking, and, thanks to a lengthy string of fine vintages which clearly appears to now include 2016, Cabernet's trajectory is still on the rise. Choosing favorites may not be easy, but we will never complain about the prospect of having too much of a good thing.

And, as a change of pace, we close out April's edition with a look at new Viogniers. Already the most successful of the white Rhône varieties to have made their way to California's vineyards, Viognier is showing new mastery on the part of so many of its makers, and this month's roster of worthies is as compelling as any we can recall with several show-stopping bottlings that deserve special attention from both those who are long-time fans of the grape and inquisitive wine lovers who have yet to make its acquaintance.

CABERNET SAUVIGNON

It is hard not to view the current lot of Cabernet Sauvignons as anything but an embarrassment of riches as the first significant offerings from 2016 and important late-arrivals from 2015 and previous harvests make their ways to market. Riveting wines from long-time favorites such as Corison, Lail, Quintessa and Ridge are joined by those from upcoming Cabernet stars such as Foretell, Ram's Gate, Sojourn and The Vineyard House to name but a few, and there are some notable buys in more modestly priced offerings happily included this month as well.

MERLOT

No longer regarded with quite the disdain it unjustly received in its post-Sideways days, Merlot is once again charming a new generation of wine drinkers who are less concerned with prevailing fashion and appreciative of the variety's up-front, fruity appeals as well as its ability to produce wines of complexity and depth. And, much as has been the case with Syrah, Merlot's temporary fall from grace means that there are plentiful good values to be found

CABERNET FRANC

As we have commented over the past several years, Cabernet Franc is finding new life in California. Its evolution away from tough and ungainly wines continues, and a widening field of styles running from sturdy and youthfully tannic to fairly refined now awaits the consumer looking to expand their vinous perspectives with particularly successful efforts from J. Lohr, Terra Valentine and The Vineyard House earning high honors this month.

MALBEC

Malbec is not often a grape that generates animated excitement from California's vintners, but spurred by its considerable success in Argentina, it is now being given new respect hereabouts. Given the efforts of an increasing number of talented producers, there seems little question but that local Malbec's potential is just beginning to be realized.

PETIT VERDOT

Very arguably the least in the hierarchy of Bordeaux's red grapes, Petit Verdot is most often employed as a blending component, but, unbound by tradition, a few adventurous producers are exploring its possibilities as a variety worth more than a sidelong glance.

VIOGNIER

Its signature floral perfume and exuberant fruit notwithstanding, Viognier is more than just another pretty face. When skillfully made as a good many of the state's versions are, it can produce very rich, well-structured wines that are as fascinating as any to be found, and the current roster of newly reviewed efforts makes a most convincing case that they should be included in any discussion of California's most appealing white wines.

BEST BUYS

Two Rhône varieties, Syrah and Grenache, rank with some of the best red-wine values around and will surprise many with their eye-opening quality when measured against comparably priced Pinot Noirs and Cabernet Sauvignons, and a quick reprise of recent favorites in wonderfully versatile Sauvignon Blancs rounds out April's shopping list of Best Buys.

CABERNET SAUVIGNON PG 101MERLOT PG 109CABERNET FRANC PG 111MALBEC PG 113PETIT VERDOT PG 114VIOGNIER PG 115BEST BUYS PG 117

APRIL 2019

Is California Cabernet Sauvignon getting "better?" If judging by escalating price tags and the ever higher "scores" handed out by critics looking to be quoted by producers and those who sell the wines, then the answer would seem to be "yes." Now, there is

no question that local Cabernet has evolved in style over the years, see-sawing between big, ripe and opulent and more restrained, but "better" must ultimately lie in the eye of the beholder, i.e., the consumer who must decide the worth of any wine.

We would argue there have always been remarkably good Cabernets to be had and fondly recall the splendid examples going back to the late 1960s and on into the 1970s, some of which are holding their own today, but, from our perspective, it is not a question of whether or not the best contemporary efforts have gotten better, it is that there are simply far more marvelous examples to be had than ever before.

It is axiomatic that the art and craft of winemaking and grape-growing must necessarily evolve with experience, sometimes in a vintner's subjective pursuit of what he or she believes to be perfection and, sometimes, as a means to satisfy the perceived demands of the market, of giving the customers what they want. And, it stands to reason that the more Cabernet makers there are, the more complex the evolution of Cabernet becomes, and that is certainly manifest in the fifty-plus years since California has become a full-fledged member of the world's fraternity of fine wine producers. We went through the unfortunate era of leaner, less-ripe "food wines" in the early 1980s and the years of unbridled ripeness as the stylistic pendulum swung back as the new millennium neared. The death of prohibitively pricey "cult" Cabernets was widely touted as economic times took a turn for the worse, and these days, the broader conversation about Cabernet focuses less than it has on celebrity makers and more on the expression of place. But, the number of extraordinarily expensive bottlings has proliferated in recent times as those with the means have very willingly pursued the state's most accomplished renditions, and, even entry-level Cabernets have steadily increased in price as a reflection of consumer demand.

We regularly hear worried musings about California Cabernet's ability to maintain its lofty status, that it is pricing itself out of the market. There are claims that Napa Valley, in particular, is over-committed to Cabernet production and that the bubble must necessarily burst. The great wines of the world, however, regardless of provenance, are not nor ever have been everyday commodities, and the inarguable fact is that, despite the welcome emergence of a growing array of new, once relatively obscure varieties, there is no let-up in the demand for California's most heralded red wine.

The good news is that tasty, very satisfying local Cabernet Sauvignon can be found at nearly every price point. Makers and growers are more experienced, smarter and more skilled, and we have been blessed with a succession of fine vintages. Poorly made examples are fewer and farther between than once was the case. Yes, the very best can be pricey and are wines to be saved for special occasions, but, again, the bigger story is that there are so many distinguished, truly accomplished versions now from which to choose, and it is most definitely time to let go of hoary, stereo-typical thinking that all local versions are monotonous expressions of a singular style.

TASTING NOTE LEGEND								
OUTSTANDING WINES	CHARACTERISTICS & TRADITIONAL USE WITH FOOD							
 Connoisseurs' Guide tastings are conducted with Image to the second conducted conducted with Image to the second cond conducted with Image to the second conducted with Image to t	 Soft and fruity wine. Quaffable by itself or with light foods. Crisp white. Medium acid and dry. Fish or delicate flavored foods. Mellow white. Dry to slightly sweet. Enough acid for white meats. Full and balanced dry White. Try with rich seafood and fowl dishes. Light Red and powerhouse White. Fowl, veal and light meats. Medium Red. Balanced, good depth, medium tannin. Beef and lamb. Robust Red. Full tannin, intense flavors. For highly spiced meat dishes. Sweet Dessert wine. Enjoyable by itself or with sweet desserts. 							
AVAILABILITY	DRINKABILITY							
 Generally available in most market areas. Limited production and/or limited geographic distribution. Very limited availability. GOV Good Value 	 ♀ Drinkable now. Unlikely to improve with further aging. ♥ Drinkable now. Further bottle aging can improve this wine. ○ Cellar for future drinking. Wine will improve with bottle aging. Not suitable for drinking. 							

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£390 12C Georges III Vineyard Rutherford 2016

Big, bold and fully ripe with a wealth of creamy, crème-brûlêelike oak surrounding its extracted, blackcurrant fruit, this bigbodied offering stresses richness over refinement. It is roughed up by tannin and palpable finishing heat, yet it succeeds all the same on the strength of its considerable depth and its relentless fruit. Nuance and refinement may not be in the offing even with age, but four or five years of waiting will be rewarded with a potent and slightly friendlier wine that will turn the trick with appropriately full-flavored foods.

£388 12C G3 Beckstoffer Georges III Vineyard 2016

Rutherford. Very much in step with its similarly sizeable sibling and, if anything, the riper and richer of the two, this one from the Beckstoffer portion of the Georges III Vineyard is a very fullbodied Cabernet that verges on the brink of being a bit too much of a good thing. It is a wine of unguestioned richness, but that richness comes at the cost of undisguised heat, and it is, at this point and most likely in the future, something of a blunderbuss that will be most appreciated by those who like their Cabernets A A \$125.00 to be big, bold and ripe.



£389 ADELAIDA Signature Series Viking Estate Vyd 2016

Adelaida District. This wine's high ripeness brings an outgoing sharp note to the fore and leaves the concentrated black cherry, somewhat blueberryish fruit at sixes and sevens before blowing off as the nose opens. What then emerges is a big, rich, billowy wine whose full body and grippy tannins push the wine towards the brawny end of the Cabernet scale. Time is on its side, and a wait of five years would not be too much in order to let things sort themselves out. There is a lot to like here, but this is a wine for fans of the breed. 100.00

£388 ADELAIDA "Viking" Viking Estate Vineyard 2016 Adelaida District. 58% Cabernet Sauvignon; 18% Malbec; 13% Petit Verdot; 11% Cabernet Franc. This blended offering is more open and inviting in its youth than its mate above, but it is also a tad on the simple, direct side—its many parts notwithstanding. Its early curranty fruit is met by a somewhat barky, foresty note, and, while ripe and rounded with moderate tannins for grip, it needs only a few years in the cellar. 1 🔐 🖓 🕫 \$50.00

86 BERNARDUS Marinus Estate Blend Carmel Valley 2013

35% Cabernet Sauvignon; 30% Merlot; 25% Petit Verdot; 8% Malbec; 2% Cabernet Franc. A wine that claims a good deal of complexity but one that lacks fruity keenness and drifts toward vegetation, this very ripe, big-bodied offering tends to be a touch heavy-footed, and it could do with a little more brightness and bounce. It sports a fair degree of tannic grip that will hold it in good stead for a few additional years of age, and, if not one that makes a strong and specific varietal statement, it is undeniably rich and substantial stuff. ▲ 600 \$75.00

85 BISHOP'S PEAK Paso Robles 2016

By Talley. 17% Malbec; 3% Merlot. Mildly herbal and graced by touches of tea in the nose but always sparing in defined Cabernet character and balanced to softness with modest tannins providing minimal grip, this underplayed effort counts cleanliness as an asset and is a simple wine that is best drunk up over the course of the next year or two. \$22.00

LACKBIR D NEYARD

£399 BLACKBIRD Contrarion Napa Valley 2015

65% Cabernet Sauvignon: 18% Cabernet Franc: 17% Merlot: Showing a varied mix of dark fruit on the nose with accents of vanilla, dried herbs, olives and black soils lending no small degree of complexity but a comparatively tough and decidedly unevolved wine once in the mouth, this big-boned bottling's flavors presently retreat under wave after wave of astringency. Age is a must here, and a mere four or five years will not do, for it is an unyielding wine that bespeaks the need for upwards of a decade of waiting before it emerges from its profoundly tannic shell and gives voice to the fruit that hides at its heart. 135.00

86 BLACKSMITH C.L.R.T. Napa Valley 2016

20% Merlot; 3% Cabernet Franc. A touch of black tea, a bit of woodsy spice and a faint note of smoke sit lightly atop proper blackcurrant fruit in this one's aromas, and the wine reiterates each of those elements in its never-flashy, yet definitively varietal flavors. It measures up as a mid-sized Cabernet, and if easy to taste now, it is underpinned by just enough tannin to benefit from short-term keeping. L m² ⊯ \$28.00

£387 BOGLE California 2016

Bogle's string of Good Value successes continues with this very affable Cabernet, and, while the wine may not compete with its big-ticket cousins in terms of layered richness and cellarworthy construction, it is a slightly supple, very well-made effort that combines nicely stated currant-like fruit with a judicious touch of sweet oak and shows surprising polish and crafting for one as inexpensive as it is. It is easy on the palate right now but will keep handily for a few years and is a welcome reminder that one can find tasty Cabernet without breaking the budget. GOOD VALUE

錙 kap p \$12.00



£388 CAROL SHELTON King Ridge Vineyard 2014

Sonoma Coast. A very keen and consistent wine from its nicely composed, solidly varietal aromas of red currants, black olives and slightly loamy, forest-floor spice straight through to its fairly bright, ever-so-slightly berry-like flavors, this trim and lively young Cabernet gets good marks for its buoyancy and energy. It is not a big and extravagant wine as the variety goes, but it is charged with fairly vigorous fruit throughout, and, if its temperate tannins pose no problem for short-term enjoyment, it has the balance and structure to grow for several years. 🚈 🐨 🌮 \$4,0.00

78 CARPE DIEM Napa Valley 2016

7% Petit Verdot. Fairly off-putting in its weedy, near-vegetal pungency and offering nary a glimmer of positive Cabernet fruit as compensation for its too-many sins, this murky, slightly slick, soft-edged bottling falls with a dulling thud on the palate and will find no remedy in cellaring. \$32.00



E3E392 CORISON Kronos Vineyard St. Helena 2015

Those familiar with this winery will recognize Cathy Corison's slightly lighter touch with Cabernet here, but the wine sports considerable fruity depth with carefully placed accents of mildly creamy oak and loamy soil affording it a good deal of varietal complexity. It is full and slightly supple on entry with a proper push of firming tannins pointing the way to a promising future, and it sacrifices nothing in the way of richness or range while taking a measured step back from bombast. Let it sit for another four or five years and anticipate another half-decade or more of guaranteed growth from there.

86 DRY CREEK VINEYARD Hillside & Benchland 2016

Dry Creek Valley. 10% Merlot; 5% Cabernet Franc; 5% Malbec; 2% Petit Verdot. There is solidity aplenty here, and reasons to expect age to help resolve some of its finishing astringency, but there is also risk involved in that strategy given the somewhat less-than-convincing fruit at its heart. Intimations of dark cherry and dark plum are joined by slightly dusty notes in both aroma and flavor, and while ripeness is not an issue here, astringency is. It needs at least a half-decade to come around and asks that you are an optimist about its chances.

39 DuMOL Montecillo Vyd Moon Mountain District 2016

Featuring dark fruits reminiscent of black cherries with a loamy soil note as well and underlying hints of black plums, the nose then picks up both curranty and oak notes as it opens. Full on the palate and on the slightly gruff, youthful side from its evident astringency, it is bound to round into drinkable form in the next three to five years and we would expect that it will hold well in bottle after that.

٤٤٤ DuMOL Napa Valley 2016

Its price and appellation notwithstanding, we are a tad fonder of its mate above from over the hill into the Sonoma Valley than we are of this admittedly attractive wine. This effort focuses on ripe black cherries with a slight tilt to ripe berries while also flashing notes of cassis and black olive. It is full in body, somewhat round in feel at entry and youthfully tannic but not so coarse as to ask for more than a few years of cellar age. Still, its depth and fruit do suggest a decade of staying power.

389 FLORA SPRINGS Trilogy Napa Valley 2016

86% Cabernet Sauvignon; 8% Petit Verdot; 6% Malbec. There was a time when "Trilogy" consisted of equal parts of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot, but it has become mostly C. Sauvignon these days, and, while it continues to be a very good wine, it is not as unique as it once was, especially considering the quality offered by the winery's single-vineyard bottlings. This one is about medium in volume with decently fruited aromas of cassis and black cherry with lighter hints of herbs and loam. It is fairly supple and a tad thick and coating on the palate with good length despite its finishing tannin.



C3C3 93 FORETELL Spring Mountain District 2016

It is hard not to be taken in by this one's voluminous and outgoing aromas of extraordinarily deep, handsomely oaked, juicy young fruit and expect similar succulence and accessibility in its flavors, but, once in the mouth, the wine is as solidly structured as it is wonderfully rich and complete, and it comes with a wealth of youthfully pushy tannins that quickly put to rest any notion that it wants drinking anytime soon. Rest assured that cellaring will result in a grand Cabernet Sauvignon for which waiting is well worthwhile, and we recommend that one allows at least a halfdecade to pass before checking in to see how it is doing on what is likely to be a ten-to-twenty year journey.

(승종) (Section 2015) FORETELL Spring Mountain District 2015

If echoing the fruity generosity and accessible richness of the 2016 version on the nose, the 2015 Foretell Cabernet is a slightly differently built wine that reminds that every vintage is not the same. Not that it is an impossibly tough wine, but it is slightly riper, a tad tighter and a bit more astringent than its younger sibling even if it, too, possesses plenty of essential fruit, and we see slightly less polish in its future. It is nonetheless a deep and very serious young Cabernet, and, if maybe not quite reaching the heights of its predecessor, it is a most collectable one that will more than satisfy once it has reached maturity some seven to ten years hence.

E387 GREAT BEAR Napa Valley 2016

Spot-on in varietal focus if never an especially potent or layered wine and one whose attractive mix of black cherries and sweet oak requires no lengthy wait to enjoy, this affable, medium-full-bodied effort is on the comparatively accessible side as young Cabernets go, yet it is nicely balanced with just enough tannic grip to stay within the varietal fold and reward a few years of additional age. \searrow \swarrow \$45.00

86 GREAT BEAR The Graduate Yolo County 2016

Ripe, but a little vague as far as keen Cabernet character goes and easy to criticize at the moment for being a little too tough for its fundamental fruit yet still a wine that is not so coarse as to be problematic when poured as a partner to hearty, well-seasoned roast meats, this one earns credit for its substance and stuffing, if not for finesse, and a couple of years in the cellar should go a long way in smoothing its rough spots. Δ \$35.00

390 HAWK AND HORSE Red Hills Lake County 2014

Nicely focused and fairly concentrated with the slightly tighter, acid-firmed structure exhibited by so many of its varietal cousins of the vintage, this bottling draws back just a bit from juicy, outgoing fruit yet shows a good curranty core and commendable length. It is on the astringent side just now and is built for the cellar rather than early drinking, but it has the continuity and depth of a Cabernet Sauvignon that will handsomely repay a half-decade and more of age.

(3) HOWELL MOUNTAIN VINEYARDS Beatty Ranch 2015 Howell Mountain. True to the sturdier, slightly tougher norms of Howell Mountain Cabernets, the winery's solidly constructed Beatty Ranch bottling teases with touches of minerally complexity

but is, in the main, fairly closed-in and brooding once past its

moderately intense, ripe currant aromas. It is presently beat up by more than a bit of back-palate tannin, but, even if dissuasively astringent at the moment, it conveys an always-convincing sense of fruity substance and depth that raises real optimism for age. Hasty drinking is best avoided, and, although a minimum of five or six years of patience is recommended, another half-dozen could pass before it rounds into its best.

388 HOWELL MOUNTAIN VINEYARDS 2015

Howell Mountain. Echoing its mate in terms of solidity and undisguised tannin yet never quite as sure of itself in terms of overall fruity strength, this well-ripened offering starts out with an attractive nose of cassis and caramel but is fairly sinewy once in the mouth, and its essential fruit presently struggles to keep pace with its considerable astringency. While expecting prettiness and polish with age may be expecting a little too much, there is little question but that a half-decade of cellaring will make for a more mannerly wine.

387 HOYT Paso Robles

This non-vintaged offering starts out on fine footing with a moderately deep nose of black cherries and cassis that is laced with notes of cola and toasty oak and follows with fairly ripe and obvious flavors wherein its cherryish qualities take the lead. It is full and fleshy in feel with ripeness becoming increasingly pronounced as its goes, and, while it is ultimately as ripe as it is keenly fruity, it does not heat up to fault and maintains a nice sense of richness throughout. h

390 J. LOHR Cuvée Pau Paso Robles 2015

72% Cabernet Sauvignon; 13% Petit Verdot; 13% Merlot; 2% Malbec. The 2015 edition of J. Lohr's tribute to the wines of Bordeaux's West Bank is a rich and sweetly oaked effort that, while placing the accent on obvious ripeness, is brimming with generous, well-defined fruit. It smacks strongly of black cherries and currants with insistent elements of olives, loamy soils and root beer running its length, and, if not at all difficult to taste at the moment, it is a wine whose structured solidity and integral tannins make a most convincing argument for no fewer than another five or six years of age.

86 KLINKER BRICK 1850° Red Wine Lodi 2015

60% Cabernet Sauvignon; 30% Petite Sirah; 10% Zinfandel. Riper than it is keenly fruity and flirting with suggestions of dried twigs and bark but avoiding chocolaty excess and claiming a reasonable degree of richness, this moderately full-bodied wine runs into a bit of finishing heat owing to its ample alcohol, and, while it is tannic enough to support a few years of aging, its fundamentally frontal nature makes it easy to approach now and argues against lengthy keeping. h g \$25.00

85 LA HONDA Salinian Block 2016

Santa Cruz Mountains. Heading off in a direction all its own and, in truth, a wine that is a little unsure in varietal focus, this medium-full-bodied working keys on slightly piquant, berry-like fruit with scattered suggestions of fresh herbs and sweet oak showing up here and there. It is a trifle thin on the palate and grows increasingly firm as it goes with tangy acidity standing out at the finish.

E3E3 92 LAIL J. Daniel Cuvée Napa Valley 2016

As brooding as it is so very deep and a richly oaked, many-layered opus of immense extract and fruity concentration that now only hints at the loamy and cocoa-nib complexities that are sure to become more prominent with age, this imposing youngster is a wine in waiting that will take a good many years to fully grow into its tannic frame. It is big, it is fully ripe and it is rough at the



margins, yet it still manages to tease with alluring glimpses of polish to come, and to think of pulling its cork before at least a half-dozen years have passed is to woefully ignore the message that it so very clearly sends. \square \square \square \square \square \square

86 LAPIS LUNA Lodi 2016

Consistently more savory than it is outwardly fruity but showing a mildly juicy, currant-like background presence that puts it on a sound varietal track, this inexpensive offering is nicely rounded in feel with just enough firming tannin to be both balanced and easy to taste in its youth. It makes no claims to breathtaking depth or complexity nor promises to do so in the future, but it a clean and honest, nicely made Cabernet for the money. **GOOD VALUE**

387 LA STORIA Alexander Valley 2016

By Trentadue. Biased to cherries and plums with a deft dollop of sweet oak lending a slightly creamy note to its likeable aromas and flavors, La Storia's is a medium-full-bodied Cabernet of moderate richness that, while not overly tannic, is nonetheless still slightly held back by its youth. It gets good marks for its continuity and persistence, and, if a pleasing enough partner to grilled meats in the near term, it is sure to unfold and improve with a few years of additional cellaring. \swarrow \$38.00

E389 LUNA Napa Valley 2016

A bit shy on intensity but getting good marks for its definition and varietal clarity with ripe cherries and currants framed by a nice dollop of sweet oak, this well-mannered, mid-density effort teases with a subtle bit of complexity, and, if never an expansive or notably bold Cabernet, it earns the nod for its continuity, its balance and its fruity persistence. It can be enjoyed early on when paired with juicy cuts of beef, but it is certain to benefit from three or four years of age all the same.

83 MAGNOLIA COURT DORRIAN California 2016

84 METTLER Lodi 2016

Introduced by a muddled mix of bacon, smoke and dried herbs on the nose, this ripe, mildly tannic, soft-edged wine fares no better once in the mouth, and, while its scattered suggestions of brown leaves and bark persist, its short-lived complement of vague, half-hearted fruit does not. h

(387 MURPHY-GOODE Alexander Valley 2015)

Leading with a straightforward, mid-density nose of currants and black cherries and showing a trim of cocoa and dried herbs along with a wispy suggestion of smoke that is reiterated in its slightly solid, nicely filled flavors, this moderately full-bodied wine edges to tannin as it crosses the palate while keeping essential Cabernet fruit in sight at all times. While never especially flamboyant or flashy, it hits the right varietal marks at a very fair price and comes with the promise of a few years of improvement if cellared. GOOD VALUE

387 NINE HATS Red Wine Columbia Valley 2016

50% Cabernet Sauvignon; 25% Merlot; 25% Syrah. Very much smelling and tasting of Cabernet's distinctly curranty qualities in spite of its mixed *cépage* and sporting a good deal of well-ripened fruit from beginning to end, this plump and inviting effort is, on the one hand, fairly easy to like right now, but has, on the other, the structure and integral, but never-severe, tannins to hold up nicely with several years of age. It will prove a useful mate to all sorts of grilled meats, and it hits the mark smartly for fine value. **GOOD VALUE**

85 NINE HATS Columbia Valley 2016

11% Syrah; 3% Merlot. On the slightly sweet and simple side on the nose with a slight note of mocha to its juicy, dark cherry fruit, this fully ripe, very slightly viscous wine never quite comes into keen Cabernet focus, yet its juicier aspects are appealing all the same even if they are cut a bit short by the arrival of late-toappear tannins. Its last-minute astringency notwithstanding, this one strikes us as wine to enjoy while still fairly young as a partner to sundry savory stews and braises.

390 NINER Fog Catcher Paso Robles 2015

30% Cabernet Sauvignon; 24% Malbec; 22% Petit Verdot; 14% Cabernet Franc; 5% Carmenere; 5% Merlot. On the one hand, a potent and powerful, near-rustic wine, but, on the other, an interesting effort that displays considerable complexity and range, the Niner Fog Catcher offers up a tantalizing aromatic mix of cassis, fresh berries, woodsy spice and scant notes of cinnamon on the nose that carries on into its lengthy and vital young flavors. It is still a bit rough at the edges, but it is so well-filled that it leaves no doubt about its ability to age, and it is one of those wines that, while very enjoyable at five or six years of age, will continue to gain for a good many more.

389 NINER Reserve Bootjack Ranch Geneseo District 2016

This moderately rich and well-measured wine leads with a deep and explicitly varietal nose wherein elements of creamy oak, ripe currants and juicy berries are very comfortably joined and follows with lengthy, very like-minded flavors that stay in sharp focus throughout. While ripe, it is never "too ripe," and its teasing early sensations of plushness are met by just the right degree of tannic firmness as it crosses the palate, and, although it is never so tough or astringent as to be unapproachable now, it is hard not believe to that better awaits those with the patience to lay it away for another four to six years.

🕄 🐻 NINER Reserve Heart Hill Vineyard 2015

Willow Creek District. 10% Cabernet Franc; 6% Petit Verdot. In many ways a more backward wine than its producer's yearyounger Reserve from the Bootjack Ranch, this one begins on good footing with rich, generously fruited, chocolate-accented aromas of currants, dark berries and a bit of woodsy spice, but, following a slightly rounded, glycerin-smoothed palatal start, it gives itself over to aggressive young tannins and winds up both hard and a touch hot at the finish. Although it goes wanting for grace now and never promises that elegance lies ahead, it is sure to reward four or five years of age and might well surprise by growing for a few more after that.

387 NINER Paso Robles 2016

9% Carmenere; 4% Petit Verdot; 3% Cabernet Franc. If neither

as rich nor as deeply fruity as its several cellarmates, Niner's basic Cabernet Sauvignon is a solid enough example of medium depth, albeit one that is fairly tough, gruff and short on polish just now. It will turn the trick in the short term as a foil to hearty, well-seasoned meat dishes, but the far smarter choice is to set it aside and bring it to the table after a few more years have passed. He $\operatorname{Full}^{\mathcal{A}}$ $\operatorname{Full}^{\mathcal{A}}$ $\operatorname{Full}^{\mathcal{A}}$

3 88 NORTH BY NORTHWEST Walla Walla Valley 2014. In a marketplace dominated by ripe and rich wines, this slightly pulled back effort deserves attention for its relative restraint that sees it deliver less bombast and moderately higher acidity. Its middensity aromas and flavors are marked by distinct black cherry fruit notes and just a hint of root beer-like sweetness. With acid pushing up tannin at the finish, it drifts into a firmer stance than most of its varietal peers.



EX3 [93] **PATLAND Select Barrel Reserve Napa Valley 2016 Stagecoach Vineyard.** So rich and outgoing as to be a little misleading in that it has plenty in reserve and is a wine that very clearly deserves cellar time, Patland's Select Barrel Reserve is a broad, highly extracted working that is as tannic as it is deep in keen Cabernet fruit. It is rife with blackcurrants and sports a full measure of sweet oak with tantalizing glimmers of succulence and discreet layering to come, but its early temptations should be avoided with certain faith that its best lies ahead. Set it aside for no fewer than a half-dozen years and know that it will evolve effortlessly for a full decade or more.

EX3 92 PATLAND Stagecoach Vineyard Napa Valley 2016 Showing strong family ties with the winery's Select Barrel Reserve from the same site and differing largely by dint of its marginally more pronounced youthful toughness, this is again a bold, fully ripened, highly extracted offering that, once past its slightly supple palatal beginnings, fights at the moment with aggressive, fairly sinewy tannins and may, in the long run, prove to need even more age that its mate. If, perhaps, always the less elegant of the two regardless of time spent in the cellar, it more than makes up in richness and sheer fruity depth for what it might lack in refinement and is a very solidy built Cabernet Sauvignon with an unquestionably long lifeline ahead.

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(3) 99 PRIDE 76% Napa County 2016

24% Sonoma County. 7% Merlot; 5% Petit Verdot. Nicely defined and persistently fruited with an attractive mix of black



C3C3 91 QUINTESSA Red Wine Rutherford 2016

6% Merlot; 5% other. A full measure of well-ripened cassis- and cherry-like fruit is overlain by a lovely, creamy oak veneer in the deep and very stylish aromas of this immediately involving effort, and the flavors that follow do not disappoint in either their fruity richness or anticipated refinement. Never a wine that goes for big impact but rather one that shows more and more layering with each sniff and sip, it shows fine depth and polish now, but its present charms are best resisted as it promises to grow even more elegant and graceful over the course of the coming four to eight years.

RAM'S GATE

EEE RAM'S GATE Bismark Mountain Vineyard 2014.

Moon Mountain District. Layered, rich and deep, this wine is well-constructed at every turn from its curranty, nicely fruity first aromatic impressions to its cola and graphite complexities that well up with air and on into its entirely convincing, keenly fruited flavors. Its tannins might overwhelm a lesser bottling, but depth and range stay in control, and the only concession to its current coarse edges that we might make would be to stash it away in the cellar for six to ten years of quiet maturation in order to let it show its full majesty.

C3C3 91 RAM'S GATE Winemaker's Cuvée 2014

Moon Mountain District. Showing distinct similarities to the wine above in ripeness, concentration and richness, this one is a tad more direct in black cherry and cassis character. While it is not higher in tannins than that bottling, it does show itself to be somewhat coarser overall and a tad less deep in juicy extract to buffer its astringency. The wine is, without doubt, a very solid, attractive offering worthy of attention and sure to reward some four to six years in the cellar.

RIDGE Monte Bello Santa Cruz Mountains 2015 11% Merlot; 7% Petit Verdot; 5% Cabernet Franc. As distinctive as ever and a Cabernet Sauvignon that is as complex as any to be found with a keen core of classic, cassis-like fruit infused with elements of black olives, fresh loam, stony soil and a trim touch of briary spice, the latest Monte Bello hews to the expected Ridge norms of temperate ripeness and very careful construction. It is altogether fascinating, eminently collectable stuff, to be sure, and becomes more interesting yet with each successive sip, but it should not be considered for drinking without having had the

RIDGE VINEYARDS

opportunity to grow into its best, and, with a requisite rest of some six to eight years, it may well emerge as its very capable maker's best effort in recent vintages. \square \square \$215.00

87 ROCK WALL Marcheschi Vineyard Alexander Vly 2016

Sweet oak plays a fairly significant role in the nose here, yet it does not overshadow the wine's ripe, blackberry and cassis themes that are picked up in the fruity flavors that follow. Young, but not tough and firmed by nominal Cabernet tannins, the wine is a fairly direct and accessible take on the grape that is built for midterm enjoyment. \swarrow $fm^{\circ} \Rightarrow 65.00

388 RODNEY STRONG Reserve Sonoma County 2015

Never a forceful wine in any way, yet nicely focused on currants and black cherries and gently sweetened by a carefully managed complement of creamy oak throughout, this very comfortable young effort has the supple, slightly rounded feel of a Cabernet that is a bit older than it, in fact, is. It is sure to hold effortlessly for a half-dozen years, but we suspect it will peak a bit earlier than that and, in truth, can be enjoyed with juicy cuts of lamb or beef in the relative near term. \square \square \square \$45.00

388 RODNEY STRONG Alexander Valley 2015

Ripe enough and full-bodied enough that it will never be taken for a shrinking violet, this nicely crafted, mid-depth effort is clean and honest from start to finish and stands as a worthy alternative when one does not want to spend big bucks on bigger, flashier wines. Its focus on direct ripe cherry fruit does come with a wisp of cassis and a streak of supporting oaky richness, and, while it does have tannin to support a half-decade of age, it does not demand it. One could easily serve it today alongside charbroiled steaks, chops or burgers when the gang comes to call.

86 RODNEY STRONG Knights Valley 2015

8% Malbec. If we are less enthusiastic about this wine relative to its sibling above, it, too, is reasonably fruity and has at least a small claim to being able to improve in the cellar. It seems to stop a bit short on the palate and picks up a mildly bitter edge in its late-going, and it joins its mate in being a choice for drinking up sooner than later. $33.00 \times 33.00 \times 33.00$

388 ROTH Reserve Alexander Valley 2016

This wine, and its mate below, seems cut from the same cloth on early inspection, but this one turns out, especially in the mouth, to have a tad more depth, a bit better balance and an extra layer of richness. Ripeness is always the first order of business, but the wine is no bruiser and its already supple beginnings suggest that some added smoothness will make itself known sooner than later in its maturation process. h

(387 ROTH Alexander Valley 2016

13% Syrah. Pretty much as ripe as its sibling above if just a touch softer overall and equally beginning to show an inviting side even now, this full-bodied effort needs but two or three years to find its way to the table. Its youthful flavors notwithstanding, it is one that has early charms and is not unreasonably priced. A grilled steak would be just the right ticket. \square \square \square \$28.00

387 SCHWEIGER Spring Mountain District 2014

A little pulled back on the nose and similarly drawn along slightly tighter lines on the palate with obvious acidity accentuating its nominal tannins without pushing it into worrisome astringency, this big-boned effort displays the sturdiness of mountain-grown Cabernet yet has the compact core of currant fruit to very clearly say its varietal name. It calls for a few more years of smoothing before being poured as a partner to steaks and chops, and it is built to keep for a good six to eight years. h

399 SEQUOIA GROVE Napa Valley 2015

7% Merlot; 6% Cabernet Franc; 2% Malbec; 1% Petit Verdot. Following hard on the heels of the very successful 2014 version, this tasty offering again earns full commendation for its rich and ripe approach coupled with more than adequate fruit, smoky hints of barrel and an intriguing whiff of bacon. It is full on the palate and somewhat tannic, but not inappropriately so, and has the stuffing to stand up well to the half dozen years of age that it needs to come fully into its own. For the nonce, it is more than capable of serving well with dishes like standing rib roast or a garlicky leg of lamb. And while it does not quite garner our Good Value imprimatur, it is decently priced in today's market for Cabernet Sauvignon.



EX394 SOJOURN Beckstoffer Vineyard Georges III 2016

Rutherford. Redolent of black cherries with a temperate touch of sweet oak and accents of graphite gradually emerging in its rich and nicely composed aromas and following form once in the mouth, this wonderfully deep and very well-focused bottling conveys a good sense of varietal solidity without erring to tannic toughness. Its nominal, young-Cabernet astringency does nothing to distract from its terrific fruity length, and, its slight suppleness on entry noted, it is a wine that very clearly deserves to be hidden away for at least five or six years. $A = \frac{1}{200}$

So Solution Solution **Solution** Solution **S**

SCJ SOJOURN Home Ranch Cuvée Sonoma Valley 2016 It may not command the lofty prices of its cellarmates from the Napa Valley, but this well-crafted working is every bit their equal when it comes to keen Cabernet focus and fruity depth, and it impresses on a number of counts from its fine structure and its terrific palatal length to its inklings of certain polish to come. It needs no more than a few years of age before being ready to drink, yet its balance and fruity strength tag it as a wine that will gain in richness and become increasingly more complex if left to rest for five to ten. \square \square \square \square \square \square \square \square \square

85 SOL ROUGE Red Hills Lake County 2014

Dense, dark and brooding as it nears its fifth birthday and a wine that is far more about structure than it is available fruit, the 2014 Lake County Cabernet from Sol Rouge is, much like its partner from the Napa Valley, a tough and decidedly swarthy wine that is bound up in acid-pushed tannins. When and if it manages to show an appreciably friendlier face is open to speculation, and, while it is built to last for a decade, the odds that it will achieve anything like elegance are against it. h

84 SOL ROUGE Napa Valley 2014

Every bit as taut and tight as its companion from the Red Hills of Lake County and even more given to acidy stiffness and tonguenumbing astringency, this is again a wine that offers little in the way of welcoming fruit, and it is so rigid that it faces a fairly steep uphill climb in its efforts to find suppleness and a positive fruity voice with age.



CSC 91 TERRA VALENTINE K Block 2016

Spring Mountain District. Terra Valentine's K Block bottling starts out with a relatively open and optimally ripened, slightly juicy, deftly oaked nose that hints at just a bit of the cherry-like sweetness of Merlot while conveying the more curranty traits of Cabernet, and it reiterates a certain juicy immediacy in its fleshy, very constant, ripe fruit flavors as well. It picks up a bit of young Cabernet toughness along its way but shows a fine sense of winemaking polish throughout, and, if not a wine that forcefully begs for a decade of age, it needs to be held for at least three or four years and has the reserve to pay real dividends for those willing to wait a few more.

E39 TERRA VALENTINE Spring Mountain District 2016

Here is a deep, very well-structured Cabernet Sauvignon that is a little reluctant on first nosing, but, given a bit of time in the glass, it unfolds to reveal an enticing mix of keen, curranty fruit carefully aligned with a trim bit of oak and elements of loamy soil and hints of dried flowers. It is still fairly tannic but no more so than might be expected of a young and substantial Cabernet, and it is both balanced and complete with a nicely sustained finish that signals good things with age. Let it sit for at least three or four years and anticipate upwards of a good half-decade of improvement from there.

(3) TERRA VALENTINE Fountaingrove District 2016

Intense and impressively extracted from the first with a building sense of deep and defined curranty fruit backed up by a balanced complement of slightly sweet oak and holding its focus nicely all the way through to a lengthy, if moderately tannic finish, this well-filled youngster is a chunky, very explicit Cabernet that is meant for the cellar rather than near-term enjoyment. It is not unduly coarse for a wine of its age, but neither is it one that wants drinking until another four or five years have passed, and it shows fine potential for a decade of growth.

389 THE McNAB McNab Ranch Vineyard Mendocino 2014

By Bonterra. 57% Cabernet Sauvignon; 30% Merlot; 9% Petite Sirah; 2% Cabernet Franc; 2% Malbec. This wine is on the tough side despite a bit of softness in the underbelly, and while we are fans of its depth, we would caution that it is likely to remain on its gruff, tannic path for some time to come. It would be a fine foil to savory beef or lamb roasts for those who like to balance chewy hunks of meat with chewy hunks of wine, in which case its ripe grape, rich, old leather character will be right up the alley of the brawny-wine crowd.

C3C3 93 THE VINEYARD HOUSE Oakville 2014

A tad riper in tone than its year-older edition but, by comparison, a bit brooding and not quite as readily explicit in its fruit at this point with hard-to-ignore tannin signaling the need for age before even beginning to show all that lies at its heart, the 2014 version nonetheless conveys a strikingly similar sense of concentration and depth and maintains a confident, distinctly curranty, varietal voice even as elevated astringency comes on a bit strong at the finish. It is indelibly marked by classic Napa Valley richness, and patience will bring manifold rewards, but it demands waiting and is not a wine meant to be poured until at least six or seven years have passed.

86 THE WINERY SF North Coast 2014

A bit limited in richness and range but still on the Cabernet track and suggesting blackcurrants and dark chocolate throughout, this bottling gradually steers to the grape's more savory side and loosens its hold on defined fruit. It narrows en route to a firm, moderately tannic finish, and, if not a wine that promises great complexity with age, it will definitely benefit from three or four years of keeping. \clubsuit **\$28.00**

85 THE WINERY SF Napa Valley 2014

Ripeness is the dominant theme here, and, even if not marred by excessive heat, the wine is ill-defined with respect to fruit and smacks of dark chocolate with a note of dried-grape desiccation. It has plenty of palatal presence but its opaque flavors are too quickly blunted by tannin, and, while its astringency should ease some with the age, its shortfall in vitality limits its chances for better, patience notwithstanding.

(387 TREFETHEN Oak Knoll District 2016

5% Malbec; 4% Merlot; 4% Cabernet Franc; 3% Petit Verdot. Although making a fairly fine start with a moderately rich, nicely layered nose of sweetly oaked, slightly juicy, cherry and currant fruit that opens to show hints of olives and loam, this bottling surprises by being fairly hard and angular and decidedly tightfisted once in the mouth without nearly the fruity drive expected. It may well be that it will unwind and achieve some much-needed charm some four or five years out, but, for now, it strikes us as



a bit of a gamble that will need a turn of good luck to make good on its attractive aromatic promise. \blacksquare \bowtie \$60.00

388 VINA ROBLES Estate Paso Robles 2016

16% Petit Verdot. For the third year in a row, Vina Robles has come up with a well-made Cabernet Sauvignon that, while a commendable effort on many fronts, from its varietal honesty to its fruity stamina and careful balance, is nothing short of an outand-out bargain. Although it is approachable now, it stands apart from most of its comparably priced cousins in that it has the structure and depth to earn a place in the cellar, and what is good now will only get better with three to five years of age. **GOOD VALUE**

86 VINROC Coyotes Howl Napa Valley 2014

14% Merlot. Notably herbal on first nosing and slightly slow in coming into clear focus as Cabernet Sauvignon, this moderately full-bodied offering counts suppleness and fairly good balance as assets, and, even if never entirely losing its strong bias to green olives and herbs, it boasts just enough underlying fruity richness to gain varietal traction as it goes. M M 465.00

388 YORKVILLE CELLARS Rennie Vineyard 2016

Yorkville Highlands. Riper in tone than its stated 13.5% alcohol might suggest and a fairly rich wine whose black cherry fruit is tinged with touches of cocoa and berries, this moderately full-bodied, well-balanced working exhibits a careful winemaking hand and is both ample and nicely polished at once. It wants a few more years of age even though it is far from rough now, and it can be counted on to be in fine drinking shape when its tenth birthday arrives.

387 YORKVILLE CELLARS Richard the Lion-Heart 2015

Rennie Vyd. Yorkville Highlands. 30% Cabernet Sauvignon; 30% Merlot; 15% Petit Verdot; 15% Cab. Franc; 5% Malbec; 5% Carmenere. On the quietly complex side in both aroma and taste with subtle suggestions of forest-floor spice and a note of freshly turned earth sitting off to the side of its slightly constrained fruit, the 2015 version of this winery's proprietary red blend shies away from obvious ripeness and tightens en route to a firm, acidframed finish. That it will age comfortably for a half-dozen years is beyond question, but restraint rather than richness looks to remain its defining trait.

389 ZD Reserve Napa Valley 2015

A touch light in volume for its otherwise solid construction and its unmistakable richness, this wine smells of ripe, sweet cherries, dark plums and whispers of cola along with roasted vanilla beans and a hint of spice. It is full on the palate with tannins that make themselves known but are suitably polished even while giving the wine an easy decade of longevity. At the price, one might expect a little more at its heart. $harvee = \frac{1}{230.00}$

EEEEE THE VINEYARD HOUSE Oakville 2013

6% Cabernet Franc; 3% Petit Verdot. Impressing for the first as a potent and yet very refined Cabernet Sauvignon of exceptional focus and tremendous fruit depth, The Vineyard House 2013 is a sumptuous, beautifully conceived, full-bodied offering withal. It lacks for nothing in the way of concentration and extract, but rather than running to obvious opulence, it is both very rich and reserved with all of the pieces in place to grow into stately, manylayered maturity. It is a serious wine in every sense of the word, and, if easy to appreciate even now, it is a can't-miss prospect for cellaring for the next ten to twenty years.



Much-maligned Merlot is getting a new look in the market these days, and its rebounding popularity is based on both its accessible fruity appeals and the fact that there are more than a few tasty, very well-made bottlings that hit the mark for fine value. In this, our latest collection of newly received Merlots, the latter point is driven home with emphasis, and, while there are certainly

many ageworthy efforts that will repay cellaring, there also plenty of affordable, easy-to-like versions that are ready to enjoy without further delay.

86 BENZIGER Sonoma County 2015

Far from complex and making no pretense to seriousness but as easy-drinking a Merlot as one is likely to find, the 2015 Benziger version is a tasty, fruit-forward wine that puts all that it has out in the open. Lightly tannic, decently balanced and never overly soft, it shows no suggestion that it will soon fade, but it demands nothing in the way of additional waiting. And, when found at a discounted price as it often is, it earns a most appreciative nod for fine value. \$19.00

86 BLACKSMITH Dry Creek Valley 2016

8% Cabernet Sauvignon; 2% Petit Verdot. Fairly direct in both scent and taste and a wine whose vouthful buovancy stands out more than does fruity richness, this spry, acid-firmed working delivers a modicum of varietal cherries, yet it wants for a bit more inner substance to adequately buffer the slightly drying, late-toarrive tannins that emerge at the finish. Even if not oppressively astringent now, it is certain to benefit from another two or three years of softening. A m ≠ \$20.00

BLUE * **ROCK**

£399 BLUE ROCK Best Barrels Alexander Valley 2016

Sweet oak jumps to the fore on first nosing here, yet deep, very specific, ripe cherry fruit never lags and the two combine for a Merlot of fine breadth and range. The wine is full and invitingly supple to start with neatly fit tannins becoming more evident as it goes, and, while always well-polished and not giving in to unruly astringency, this is one with the structure and stamina to age effortlessly for five or more years and steadily build on the layered Some \$75.00 richness that it already shows.

86 BOGLE California 2016

Here is a nicely balanced, well-scrubbed effort that begins and ends with the accent on the ripe cherry properties of Merlot, and, although not a wine that impresses with its complexity or potency, it is decidedly friendly and true to the grape. It is ready to drink now despite showing a slight tag-end of tannin that suggests it will keep handily for a couple of years, and, like so many of Bogle's recent varied varietal bottlings, it stands out among its peers when it comes to exceptional value. 品品

GOOD VALUE

m \$ \$10.00

§ 388 BOOTLEG Red Wine Napa County 2015

53% Merlot; 21% Petite Sirah; 20% Syrah; 6% other. Merlot might comprise the larger percentage of this weighty and fairly robust, blended bottling's mix, but it is the wine's Rhônish pieces that stand out the most and contribute an obvious and insistent streak of slightly peppery and vaguely gamy spice to its very ample and well-extracted, blackberry-like fruit. It runs into a fair amount of youthful finishing tanning without losing its fruity bearings, and its emphatic richness directs it to drinking with heartier fare whether poured early or, as it should be, after being allowed three to five years of age. **∲** \$38.00

£387 CHATEAU STE. MICHELLE Indian Wells 2016

Columbia Valley. Here is a straightforward, but well-defined Merlot that goes straight to the variety's cherry-like point and gets a polite boost in richness from its cautious appointment of slightly sweet oak. It is moderately full on the palate, and, while its gentle tannins provide a proper bit of tactile grip and ensure that the wine will keep nicely for several years, they in no way interfere with entirely tasty drinking right now.

GOOD VALUE 餾 TAP ⊈¢ \$20.00



£388 DRY CREEK VINEYARD Meritage Dry Creek Valley 2016

65% Merlot; 16% Cab. Franc; 10% Malbec; 5% Petit Verdot; 4% Cabernet Sauvignon. Boasting a fairly full and fruity nose that is very much keyed on ripe cherries, slightly supple and close to plush on the palate, this neatly tailored, medium-full-bodied Meritage favors Merlot in no uncertain terms. Its well-managed tannins afford structure without imparting anything in the way of toughness, and, while it is a young wine with fine prospects for further refinement with age, it is wholly free of any angles or edges that might compromise its enjoyment if poured in the ⊥ m² ⊭- \$30.00 shorter term.

£387 EDUCATED GUESS Napa County 2016

10% Cabernet Sauvignon: 6% Petite Sirah. Distinctly varietal in its very immediate aromas of dark cherries and herbs and enriched by an attractive, sweet-oak presence both in the nose and on the palate, this ripe and rounded, moderately full-bodied wine ups the ante a bit when it comes to overall richness and tactile heft. It gets fairly tannic in the late-going, enough so to warrant some cellar time, and, if serviceable now with steaks and savory roasts, it will see its manners improved by a few years of age. GOOD VALUE 餾 Fri P \$25.00

£387 FERRARI CARANO Sonoma County 2015

Very much on point as Merlot and clearly displaying ripe-cherry fruit from first sniff to finish with mildly herbal nuances that are wholly in keeping with the variety, this rounded, moderately fullbodied working is a touch viscous on entry before firming as its well-integrated tannins appear. It allows a scant edge of heat to show at the finish, but its juicier nature persists and its clean-ascan-be fruit handily wins the day.

GOOD VALUE

\$21.00

£388 J. LOHR Cuvée POM Paso Robles 2015

6% Malbec; 1% Cabernet Sauvignon. Decidedly ripe in tone but fairly complex as well with an expansive nose that smacks of cherries, plums, toasty oak, minerals and wildflowers leading to very rich, wide-open flavors that follow suit, J. Lohr's bow to Pomerol is a slightly fleshy, mouthfilling wine that is flush with

sweet fruit. It is also fairly tannic and presently fights with a little too much back-end astringency, but it has the goods to outgrow its ragged youth and should be left to rest on the cork for another two or three years at the very least. 1 50.00

84 JOSH California 2017

Clean but not especially generous in fruit and showing touches of Merlot's herbal side throughout, this simple and slightly dilute rendition might arguably toe the varietal line, but it is relatively skimpy stuff that fundamentally behaves a little too much like the inexpensive wine that it is. \$15.00

86 KUNDE Sonoma Valley 2015

Tilting to ripeness and vaguely suggestive of bittersweet chocolate on initial nosing with a bit of black cherry fruit making a delayed appearance and then staying the course in its flavors and easily surviving a slight rise in back-end tannin and heat, this rounded, medium-full-bodied Merlot finds a secure place in the middle of the varietal road and shows the potential for a few years of age while being readily drinkable now. 1 6 22.00

86 LARRY HYDE Hyde Vineyard Carneros Napa Valley 2015

Youthfully fruity but somewhat narrow overall with a trim of fresh herbs to its themes of tart cherries and cranberries, this is a fairly constrained take on Merlot that opts for brightness rather than richness and shows a wee streak of greenness from start to finish. It lacks the substance to age for more than a few years and is one to tag for drinking with lighter foods than are called for by its weightier relations. 🗠 🖙 🖈 \$85.00



£387 MARKHAM Napa Valley 2016

Although a little low-keyed and aromatically simple right out of the gate, this wine shows more of everything once in the mouth and offers up a generous serving of well-ripened cherries that easily prevails over a mild measure of tannin. It has more than enough fruity stuffing to make its minor touch of last-minute heat moot, and its lack of young-red-wine coarseness makes for a fairly weighty Merlot whose enjoyment is not conditional on lengthy aging. Drink it now or hold it for a couple of years. **GOOD VALUE** 餾 m² ⊭ \$25.00

£387 NINE HATS Columbia Valley 2015

15% Cabernet Franc; 4% Petit Verdot. This is a comparatively sturdy Merlot that steers well away from the more supple and rounded norms of the variety, and, while it teases with elements of dark cherries and plums here and there and suggests a fair degree of depth, it is presently something less than forthcoming in fruit. It is both big-bodied and a bit coarse on the palate with a challengingly tannic finish, and, although its modest price might imply otherwise, it is not a wine for hurried drinking and needs to be set aside for a few years.

GOOD VALUE

1 m² - \$25.00

£387 OBERON Napa Valley 2016

An amiable Merlot that appeals more for its manners than for brawn and one that is very varietally specific in its mildly herbal, distinctly cherry-like fruit, this well-constructed, medium-fullbodied effort is ripe without letting ripeness become its larger voice. It is mildly tannic and on the slightly firm side in balance,

and, if certainly a wine that can enjoyed in the near term, it will hold up for several years and age nicely for several more by dint of its careful composition and structure. GOOD VALUE

品品 TAP ŵ-\$23.00

86 PRIDE Napa Valley 2016

15% Cabernet Sauvignon; 1% Petit Verdot. The wines from this producer can usually be counted on to be rich and outgoing in ripe fruit and sweet oak, but that is not the case here, and what fruit this tightly structured offering shows is surprisingly frontal and goes into retreat as tannin rises to blunt its finish. Age will no doubt improve its lot and work to alleviate its stiffness, yet we would be much more optimistic about its future if it had a little more sustained fruity drive. 品品 m² = \$62.00

86 SCHWEIGER Spring Mountain District 2014

18% Cabernet Sauvignon. Surprisingly fresh on the nose for a wine of its age and similarly a youthfully tight wine on the palate that steers away from its variety's typically juicy aspects, this one, while not without fruit, is cut from leaner, less opulent cloth. The fleshiness it briefly shows on entry gives way to elevated acidity and tannin, and it is a Merlot for those who prefer their wines to be more structured than they are fruity.

85 SHOOTING STAR Lake County 2016

A little lean and light in fruit even if hinting here and there at varietal cherries and exhibiting a brushy trim to its mid-density aromas and flavors, this wine wants for the charm of Merlot, and, although no more than mildly tannic, it winds up on the slightly sere side of things at the finish. A bit of aging will not hurt, but neither will it guarantee beauty. 1 6 \$15.00

83 SKYFALL Columbia Valley 2015

A bit muddled and murky if not out-and-out dirty and struggling with limited success to find the fruit to offset its insistent smoky, charred-wood and damp-forest-floor qualities, this wine fails to convey either the charm or juicy appeal of good Merlot, and we can see no reason to believe that further time in the bottle might possibly change its stripes. \$15.00



£388 STAGS' LEAP WINERY Napa Valley 2015

With a moderately dense, yet fairly accessible aromatic mix of cherries, plums and a bit of dark earth that is replayed on the palate, this wine proves to be a little misleading in that it is on the slightly rugged, still-youthful side and is not the ready-todrink Merlot that its nose and first flavor impressions suggest. Not that it is disarmingly coarse, but it is definitely a few years away from its best. Drink it soon if you do not mind its rustic manners, but know that it has the fruity confidence and depth to make cellaring free of risk. ▲ 🖓 🕬 \$35.00

86 STERLING Napa Valley 2015

With a ripe and mildly meaty nose that promises a little more density than its flavors delivers, this is a rounded, well-scrubbed Merlot of middling weight that, if always hewing to the black cherry imperatives of the grape, comes up a bit short in its reach for richness and range. It is no more than modestly tannic, very approachable now and will be at its best when drunk up before too many years have passed. 餾 FTP P \$25.00



85 SUMMERS Reserve Knights Valley 2017

Very ripe and decidedly grapey in character, this thickly textured, very full-bodied wine is decidedly awkward stuff that, while rich beyond any question, is, at least for now, a monolithic study in ripeness rather than a wine that speaks with any varietal clarity. It is admittedly very young, but it will have a difficult time growing beyond its hot and heavy-footed youth and finding so much as a slight semblance of grace.

E3391 TERRA VALENTINE Spring Mountain District 2016

Putting an especially fine first foot forward with an intense and impressively concentrated nose of juicy black cherries, vanilla and slight cola-like sweetness and not in the least disappointing on the palate, Terra Valentine's is a very deep and broadly fruited Merlot that is fleshy, full and fairly vibrant all at once. It shows a well-integrated streak of underlying tannin without sacrificing a



whit of the welcoming suppleness that marks the best of the breed, we see a better, more graceful wine yet if it is allowed to sit for a few years, but we also admit that there is so much to like now that patience will not come easy. $\bigotimes \ensuremath{\mathbb{K}} \ensurem$

388 TREFETHEN Oak Knoll District 2016

9% Cabernet Sauvignon; 5% Malbec. Ripe, red cherry fruit sits at the heart of this carefully balanced, medium-full-bodied Merlot, and, if never a big and boisterous offering, the wine is continuous and nicely balanced with a trim touch of tannin lending a proper bit of firmness. There are fancier, more extravagant versions to be had, but this one hits the varietal mark with authority and will improve with a few years of bottle age.



Cabernet Franc, which is, with Sauvignon Blanc, one of Cabernet Sauvignon's two parents, is often spoken of as being lighter and less tough than its offspring, but that is not always the case, especially here in California. Until relatively recently,

Cabernet Franc was employed principally as a blending grape locally, and those few bottlings whose percentage was sufficient to be labeled varietally tended to be on the rough and rather astringent side of things. While fairly rugged versions still abound, so, too, have a number of more refined efforts emerged to prove that the variety is capable of making genuinely complex, ageworthy wines of commendable richness and range as well as a handful of brighter, minimally tannic renditions reminiscent of the lighter Cabernet France's Loire Valley.

86 BLUE ROCK Best Barrels Alexander Valley 2016

A bit hesitant in fruit right from the first with but a fairly quiet suggestion of cherries and berries overlaid by notes of dried brush and brown leaves in its aromas and fundamentally following suit in its slightly narrow, less-than-bountiful flavors, this medium-full-bodied Cabernet Franc gets credit for not being abrasively astringent, yet comes with questions as to whether it has the fruity strength to fully justify the four to six years of cellaring that its all-too-palpable tannins commend. \triangle

85 COSENTINO The Franc Lodi 2017

Vaguely suggestive of blackberry jam and more concerned with chocolaty ripeness than it is with keen varietal character even if it runs into a bit of Cabernet Franc toughness in the late-going, this slightly fat and frontal, full-bodied offering very much shows its warm-weather provenance and is all about obvious richness rather than detail or nuance of any kind. h

86 FIELD RECORDINGS Franc Paso Robles 2017

Lighter in color, lesser in mass and much lower in alcohol (11.9%) than the majority of its varietal kin, this slender but spry, mediumbodied rendition smacks of fresh raspberries and orange rind along with the barest hint of oak. It distantly recalls the lighter Cabernet Francs of France's Loire Valley, and it is quaffable wine that wants drinking sooner than later.

(3) BOWELL MOUNTAIN VYDS. Howell Mountain 2015 This solid and fairly expressive Cabernet Franc is charged with a good deal of well-stated, slightly juicy, young, black and red berry fruit that very capably buffers its ample, yet never-excessive tannin,



390 J. LOHR Cuvée St.E. Paso Robles 2015

20% Cabernet Sauvignon. Inspired by the Cabernet Franc-based bottlings of France's Saint-Émilion district, J. Lohr's latest Cuvée St. E. is a very rich and fruit-centric wine that never gives in to the runaway astringency that compromises so many local Cabernet Francs. It is solidly built, to be sure, and it has the tannic structure to warn off hasty drinking, but concentrated red berry and black cherry fruit is dominant throughout. It should begin to unfold nicely in three or four years and has the look of a wine that will improve for at least twice as long. h m^{S} \sim \$50.00

85 LAVA VINE Napa Valley 2015

Clean and modestly fruity with a touch of sweet oak to its mildly cherry-like aromas yet a relatively spartan and slightly thin wine once in the mouth, this one may not be stridently tannic, but its laconic flavors are summarily overtaken by drying astringency all the same, and no amount of cellaring can make up for its essential lack of fruity heart. \mathcal{M} \mathcal{M} \mathcal{F} \$54.00



388 PRIDE 62% Napa County; 38% Sonoma County 2016

22% Cabernet Sauvignon. A good bit of sweet oak is teamed with nicely extracted blueberry-like fruit first in the nose and then again in the moderately deep flavors of this comparatively wellmannered Cabernet Franc, and, even if it runs to conspicuous, eleventh-hour tannins as wines of its variety almost inevitably seem to do, it is not nearly as hard and unyielding as many and has the sustained fruity substance to ensure better with three to five years of age.



387 SCHWEIGER Spring Mountain District 2015

20% Cabernet Sauvignon; 1% Malbec. More savory than sweet at every stop and biased to woodsy spice with subtle accents of mint and green tea to its comparatively quiet fruit, this firmly built Cabernet Franc is distinctly varietal in tone and speaks more to structured restraint than to expansive richness. It is not overly tough but its combination of acidity and evident tannin argues for three to five years of patience. \bigotimes 63.00

85 SOL ROUGE Red Hills Lake County 2014

This tightly built wine may be approaching its fifth year, but it still shows the tactile edges and angles of a fairly young wine, and while it leads with a healthy amount of lively, dark cherry fruit on the nose, its fruit retreats on the palate as acid and tannin impart palpable harshness. \Im \Im \Im 39.00

85 STEELE Lake County 2016

Cabernet Franc's rough and rugged side is on full display here, and, although the wine does show a modicum of ripe, plum and raspberry fruit working in league with woodsy spice on the nose, it is tough as nails on the palate with unbridled tannins outdistancing everything else. Age might alleviate some of its severity, but we expect that this one will remain largely unchanged regardless of how long it is held. \square \square \square \square \square \square

399 TERRA VALENTINE Spring Mountain District 2016

Its mountain origins might predict a stout and sturdy Cabernet Franc that, when as young as this one is, will be on the fairly tannic and backward side of things, yet that turns out not to be the case here. The wine is, in fact, loaded with fully ripe, wellextracted, unexpectedly forthright, cherry and berry fruit, and its flavors show exceptional fruity length. It is a weighty and wellstructured effort that steers clear of toughness and oppressive astringency, and, it is withal a complete and carefully made wine that will grow more impressive for at least another three to five years and we would not be at all surprised if it keeps going well past its tenth birthday.



C3C3 91 THE VINEYARD HOUSE Oakville 2014

10% Cabernet Sauvignon. Taking a big step back from its burlier relations and showing both an uncommon sense of polish and layered depth for Cabernet Franc, this exceptionally well-crafted offering is a serious wine that trades unconstrained potency for marvelous fruity clarity and takes on extra richness from its neatly fit complement of sweet oak. It is full without being needlessly brawny and shows a degree of early suppleness that will only become more evident with time, and, while moderately tannic, its tannins are sheathed by wave after wave of arresting red and black fruit. Three or four more years must pass before it reaches full stride, and we see increasingly good things ahead as the next decade unfolds.



(387) WRITER'S BLOCK Lake County 2016

Juicy and fruity on the nose and suggestive of the plump and outgoing black cherry fruit of Merlot and holding its fruity line nicely across the palate, the Writer's Block Cabernet Franc is a very approachable, well-manned rendition that avoids the tannic harshness that so often attends young examples of the variety. It can take a bit of age but in no way demands it, and it will make tasty drinking with sundry meat dishes in the near-to mid-term. **GOOD VALUE**



387 YORKVILLE CELLARS Rennie Vineyard 2016

Yorkville Highlands. Not a Cabernet Franc of swagger and pushy ripeness but an amicably fruity one that successfully shows off the slightly herbal, tea-leaf-like aspects of the grape, this midsized working is a lithe and somewhat trim presentation that is bright, buoyant and lively with nicely reined-in tannins lending firmness without toughening. A few years of cellaring should see it through to its best, but it is, in all truth, a genial, easy-to-like wine even now.



Malbec, known traditionally as a minor blending grape in Bordeaux and the principal component in the inky red wines of Cahors, found new identity in the high plains of Argentina's Mendoza district during the 1990s and is now getting attention in California. It may not be the "next big thing" locally, but a few serious producers are proving its worth hereabouts as both a stand-alone variety and as a partner to other traditional Bordelais varieties.

85 BERRYESSA GAP Yolo County 2016

Among the lighter, more mild-mannered Malbecs under review and one that shows little ambition or sophistication, this clean, comparatively simple, mid-sized effort counts direct, loosely cherrylike fruit in its favor and is not nearly as forbiddingly tannic as the lion's share of its varietal mates. h m p \$25.00

85 CADARETTA Southwind Walla Walla Valley 2015

Ripe and hinting at a touch of sweet leather but fundamentally closed-in on the nose and very similarly more brooding than it is forthcoming in flavor, this dense, but fairly heavy and somewhat lethargic wine comes across at being relatively dry at its heart and labors to overcome what is more bitter-edged tannin than its all-to-shy fruit is up to handling. \bigotimes \bigwedge \leqslant 65.00



389 GRATUS Napa Valley 2015

Here is a somewhat different approach to Malbec that opts for rich, fairly juicy, wide-open fruit and holds the variety's typically sturdy tannins to a minimum. It marries ripe cherries and plums with a nice streak of sweet oak, and, although most definitely on the full-bodied side of things, it is far more supple than most. It is not, however, heavy or overly soft in structure. It is balanced to improve for at least a few years and is certain to keep handily for many more.

387 LAVA VINE Napa Valley 2015

Redolent of boysenberries in its sweet and very slightly tangy fruit and taking on an additional element of sweetness from a polite bit of oak, Lava Vine's is a rich, full-bodied Malbec that is biased to ripeness and buttressed by moderately grippy tannins on the latter-palate. Its back-end astringency stands in contrast to its supple, slightly viscous beginnings just now, and what was an initially open wine proves to be one that is best held back for a few more years of age. \swarrow \$45.00

387 NINE HATS Columbia Valley 2015

8387 NINER Reserve Heart Hill Vineyard Paso Robles 2016

14% Cabernet Sauvignon; 2% Merlot. Immediately impressing as a ripe and extracted wine, yet a little closed-in and taking its time to unfold and displaying a sense of ambition and growing fruity confidence as it does, this broad and mouthfilling Malbec inclines to the cassis-like fruit of Cabernet Sauvignon with notes of dark chocolate just off to the side. It is a big-shouldered wine, that, while not impossibly tannic, is sufficiently gruff to dissuade hasty drinking, and it should be left untouched in a dark corner of the cellar for a good four or five years. $\bigotimes_{i=1}^{\infty}$ i_{i} $\sum_{i=1}^{\infty}$ \$65.00

 \mathfrak{S} 9 PATLAND Terra del Cuore Select Barrel Reserve 2016 Napa Valley. Patland's pair of Malbecs sit on the weightier and riper end of the varietal spectrum and are imposing wines with respect to sheer potency. This one is the slightly bolder of the two and introduced by an intense, lavishly oaked nose that is rife with fully ripe berries. It delivers all of the advertised extract and concentration on the palate with flavors of chocolate-tinged fruit a short step in advance of tannin and a bit of last-minute heat, but, for all of its considerable richness and clearly evident depth, this wine absolutely demands age and calls for no less than a half-dozen years of patience.



£399 PATLAND Terra del Cuore Select Barrel Reserve 2015

If not two identical peas in a pod, Patland's hefty, highly extracted Malbecs are very clearly cut from the same sturdy cloth, yet the 2015 version differs a bit in its slightly more supple feel and what are at least intimations of polish. It is a big wine by any measure with deep, very generous, dark berry fruit marking every step of its way, and, while hardly temperate in its tannins, it is by small measure the less roughshod of the two. That is not to say that it is meant for short-term drinking, and a good five or six years of cellaring is in order here as well.

86 RODNEY STRONG Reserve Sonoma County 2015

Opening with an interesting aromatic mix of ripe cherries, back tea and dried herbs and very much running parallel in taste until fairly chalky astringency works to truncate its finish, this wine does not quite live up to its attractive start. Although it is not all that clear whether or not it has the fruity stamina to successfully outgrow its tannins, it cannot but be helped by at least three or four years of cellaring.

387 SCHWEIGER Spring Mountain District 2015

21% Cabernet Sauvignon; 1% Cabernet Franc. Never a big or particularly hedonistic wine, but very steady in its focus on ripe currants and highlighted by complexing touches of forest-floor spice throughout, this moderately full-bodied offering is fleshy and firm in balance. Its never-too-pushy, well-managed tannins that lend enough structural spine to guarantee three to five years of useful drinking but are never so blatant as to make the wine difficult to enjoy earlier on.

387 SUMMERS Sonoma Valley 2017

Big and a bit bulky but an unquestionably rich wine that claims a good deal of extracted, very ripe fruit that is set against elements of mocha and bittersweet chocolate, this is a muscular, unrefined Malbec that is a touch hot at the edges. Elegance looks to lie out of reach even if set aside for the three or four years that its pushy tannins will need before easing, yet it scores well for richness and will team agreeably with hearty cuts of well-seasoned meats if allowed to age. \bigotimes \int \int \Longrightarrow \int \int

390 TREFETHEN Dragon's Tooth Napa Valley 2016

47% Malbec; 27% Petit Verdot; 23% Cab. Franc; 3% Merlot. Boasting a concentrated, fully ripe, black cherry presence and showing attractive highlights of vanilla, dusty soils and touches of briary spice from front to back, Trefethen's Malbec-heavy proprietary blend is a very rich and fairly rough-hewn wine that frames its ample, well-extracted fruit with a full measure of gritty, undisguised tannins. It is rather unpolished at this point in its very young life, yet, for all of its obvious toughness, it is driven by deep fruit throughout. It is sure to find much-needed manners with the passing of time and needs to be laid away for no fewer than four or five years. \bigotimes **60.00**

86 TWISTED CEDAR Lodi 2014

11% Cabernet Franc; 7% Petite Sirah. Ripe and vaguely smoky with a green olive cast to its continuous, if somewhat indistinct, fruit and a slightly scaled-down, modestly complex Malbec that is fairly supple until its nominal tannins cut in, this one steers away from the sprawl and heft exhibited by its bigger, meatier mates. It has the rounded-off edges of a wine that will drink comfortably in the near term, and it is a likeable bottling at the price.

86 YORKVILLE CELLARS M-PV Rennie Vineyard 2015 Yorkville Highlands. 50% Malbec; 50% Petit Verdot. Although its two varieties more often than not predict a wine of muscle and sinew, Yorkville Cellars' M-PV blend is a fairly temperate, medium-bodied effort that, while balanced to firmness, is lesser in tannin and heft. It is quietly fruity with a slight woodsy streak and a bit underplayed with regard to richness, and, although admittedly slightly complex in its way, it could do with a boost in essential fruit.



Best known for its ability to lend color and structure to blended red wines, late-ripening Petit Verdot occupies a growing niche in California. Its local plantings have increased by more than fifty percent over the last ten years, but the lion's share has been in the warmer climes of the state's Central Valley rather than in the cool coastal districts, and its role in fine winemaking looks to remain limited for the foreseeable future.

86 BISHOP'S PEAK Elevation 2015

By Talley. 45% Petit Verdot; 25% Merlot; 23% Malbec; 7% Cab. Franc. Mildly plummy, if never forcefully fruity, and a supple, nicely textured wine on the palate, this uncomplicated blend earns good marks for its easy drinkability, but it ultimately wants for more vigor and depth and is a little too limited in fruit to work its way into recommended ranks.



388 BLUE ROCK Best Barrels Alexander Valley 2016 کا

100% Petit Verdot bottlings are rarely wines of polish and grace, but here is an example that evokes a good deal of both and shows little of the grape's usual toughness. It is full and slightly supple with elements of juicy berries, cherries and plums sweetened with an attractive dollop of creamy oak, and, while it is not without noticeable tannin, enduring fruit rather than astringency is its most lasting message. It has the pieces in place to evolve for a half-decade and more but should shape up quite nicely after only a few years have passed.

85 HEARST RANCH "Pancho" Paso Robles 2016

13% Malbec. Hard-charging ripeness is the dominant theme here, while fruit lags well behind at every point. The wine's flavors are summarily blunted by drying, slightly bitter tannins just now, and, wishful thinking aside, it is hard to imagine that this too-tough-for-its-own-good effort will manage to find anything like charm or friendliness later on. \bigotimes integer \$45.00

66 HOWELL MOUNTAIN VYDS. Howell Mountain 2015

Petit Verdot is by nature a fairly tough customer, and it is made

tougher still when elevated acidity accentuates its typical tannins as it does here. This sturdy and fairly sinewy rendition is ripe and extracted with minerally, graphite-like elements intermixed with notes of dark soils and dark fruit, but it is far from juicy and is patently puckery as it finishes. It is best laid away for at least a half-dozen years, but do not expect it to ever be a pretty and beguilingly fruity wine. \bigotimes 65.00

£387 LAVA VINE Napa Valley 2015

Showing intriguing grace notes of dried flowers to its dense, but relatively juicy aromas and a Petit Verdot that, if not quite so mannerly as to be called "refined," Lava Vine's fairly broad and big-bodied version tempers its varietal tannins with a good deal of fruit and inclines more to suppleness than to gritty toughness. That said, it is has a few rough edges to lose and is well worth cellaring for three to five years.

388 THE FARM The Big Game Paso Robles 2015

45% Petit Verdot; 44% Syrah; 11% Cabernet Sauvignon. Not at all hard to pick out as a blend, and a fairly interesting one that combines elements of red cherries and cranberries with hints of minerals and scant notes of green peppercorns, this is a slightly subdued wine by the richer and riper standards we have come to expect of its maker. It is moderately full-bodied, quite nicely balanced and very well-made, and, save for its slight want of a bit more fruity get-up-and-go, it would be in the running for higher marks yet.

£387 YORKVILLE CELLARS Rennie Vineyard 2015

Yorkville Highlands. This nicely managed Petit Verdot strays from the swarthy, stubbornly tough model and keys on the slightly peppery and diffusely herbal, vaguely conifer-like traits of the grape while showing a welcome, ripe fruit presence. Its tannins are noticeable but arguably light by varietal standards and are handily buffered by a fair measure of fruity extract before it ends on a mildly astringent note that is largely made moot by service with food. \circledast \$34.00

Viognier

California may or may not deserve credit for saving Viognier from extinction as some have claimed, but its quick local success under the aegis of Calera, Alban and Joseph Phelps some thirty years back certainly seemed to presage revived interest for the grape in its French home. These days it has established itself locally as the most significant of all white Rhône varieties and is responsible for serious, singularly unique, intensely aromatic wines that are quite unlike any other.

£388 ALARA San Benito County 2017

Showing an abundance of juicy, yellow-fleshed fruit and a wine of considerable richness and size, this one has the weight of a big, very ripe Chardonnay, but its focus is convincingly Viognier from beginning to end. It is slightly viscous and close to thick in feel with a bit of undisguised heat peeking through at the finish, and it is a bit of a showboat overall, but it will drink admirably when teamed with the boldly flavored foods that its fulsome, full-bodied style commends. Som and \$31.00



£3£391 BONNY DOON Vin de Glacière 2017

Santa Ynez Valley. A decade has passed since Randall Grahm's last endeavor at creating "Ice Wine" the easy way by freezing grapes after harvest rather than waiting for fickle nature to do the job in the vineyard, but "Vin de Glacière" has returned and, in its new incarnation, is made from Viognier, instead of Muscat as was the previous case. The new version is wonderfully lush, very sweet and well-balanced at once with loads of apricotty fruit merging with elements of honeysuckle and citrus. At 16.5% residual sugar, it is sure to be loved by those with an insatiable sweet tooth, but it is neither simple nor cloying and is, instead,

DARIÕUSH

a deep and fairly serious, very well-crafted wine that will make memorable drinking with fruit-based desserts and rich, creamy cheeses of all kinds. 375 ml bottle. 🗎 🥴 🕫 \$20.00

£387 CÁPO CREEK Sonoma Coast 2017

Very specifically varietal albeit a milder, slightly smaller, guietly floral take on Viognier that plays to citrusy freshness and blossoms more than it does to opulent ripeness, this sleek, pertly balanced bottling is finished with crisping acidity and is a vibrant version well-suited to service with lighter, early courses featuring the likes of shrimp or cracked crab. Som and \$28.00

(387 CAROL SHELTON Wild Thing Damiano Vineyard 2017

Placer County. Fresh and flowery with a slight honeysuckle tinge to its white peach aromas and maintaining an insistent sense of brightening freshness from first sniff to finish, Ms. Shelton's rounded, medium-full-bodied, sparkling clean Viognier is an agile and nicely defined, moderately ripe rendition that we would opt to drink while its youthful energy is at its height.

GOOD VALUE \$20.00

£387 CLINE North Coast 2016

Fully evocative of the flowery, slightly tropical fruit that makes Viognier so winsome and easy to like, this inexpensive offering from Cline is second to none when it comes to out-and-out value. While fairly simple, it is unmistakably varietal, juicy and still alive, but it is not a wine to wait on any longer and should be drunk up before the coming dog days of summer have gone. GOOD VALUE H B P

\$12.00

€3€3€395 DARIOUSH Napa Valley 2017

Always among the richest, most sumptuous Viognier renditions to be had, Darioush hits the mark once again with a weighty, full-bodied offering that goes for it all. Its intense, lightly honeyed aromas of ripe peaches and pears are followed with expressive, exceptionally deep, wonderfully complete flavors that build on the promise of the nose, and it is impeccably balanced for the ample wine that it is. It is, in fact, so solidly structured and imbued with such fruity strength that it is the rare example that promises to be even better with age. Drink it now with garlicky chicken or flavorful shellfish preparations, or let it rest for three to five years with full confidence that it will show more layering and polish ≟ ~ ♥ \$48.00 with time.

DUMOL

£3£3£395 DuMOL Wild Mountainside Russian River Vly2016

Sharing a place at the very head of the class with the somewhat more extravagant bottling from Darioush, this lovely effort from another perennially successful producer dials back a bit when it comes to sheer lavishness, but it exhibits great varietal richness, layering and depth while rife with youthful energy. It, too, is a full and exceptionally well-structured Viognier that is destined to age famously, and, for all of its juicy immediacy and unceasing fruit, it is, in all truth, not nearly as impressive now as it is certain to be later on. Consider yourself lucky if you happen to find a few bottles and summon the willpower to let this one rest for at least another three or four years. ▲ ~~ \$48.00

388 EBERLE Mill Road Vineyard Paso Robles 2017

This very young and solidly fruity offering is at first a bit slow to open but gradually blooms to show a certain seriousness to its fairly dense, mineral-trimmed flavors of ripe peaches and slightly hardwood-like spice. It is full and well-structured with very good palatal length, and it is an ageworthy Viognier, that while a little less outwardly showy than some at this point in its life, exhibits fine varietal coherence and a very clear capacity to grow with time. GOOD VALUE ∞ \$≈ \$26.00 台

83 JASON STEPHENS Central Coast 2014

More candied than fruity and a bit fuzzy in focus without a firm grasp on varietal character, this very ripe, full-bodied, glycerinfattened wine too guickly turns to harshness and heat on the palate with lingering bitterness outlasting any sense of fruit in its decidedly coarse finish. Sorra and \$24.00

£388 JEFF COHN 2 Guys 2 Barrels Stagecoach Vineyard 2017

Napa Valley. Power and potency this one most certainly has, yet pushy ripeness takes the upper hand over engaging fruit here, and, while very full-bodied, laced with sweet oak and emphatically rich, the wine is patently inelegant stuff with slightly too much palpable heat and too little of Viognier's inherent prettiness and charm. It is one to save for service with appropriately substantial, boldly flavored foods and is best brought to the table in the next year or two. \$55.00

£390 LAWER Betsy's Vineyard Knights Valley 2016

Very outgoing right from the start with a wealth of fresh, yet fully ripe, slightly peachy fruit leading the way and very clearly expressing the honeyed richness and floral attributes of Viognier every step of its way, Lawer's is a wide-open working of good size and weight. It is just firm enough to dispel any thoughts that it must be drunk down in haste, but is wholly enjoyable now and will turn the trick tonight as a tasty foil to mildly spicy East Asian dishes, especially those finished with a slight bit of sweetness. GOOD VALUE 台

\$28.00



£3£392 PRIDE Sonoma County 2017

As ripe, rich and outgoing as any, Pride's latest Viognier is a lavish, big-bodied offering brimming with sweet, highly extracted fruit. It keys on peaches and pears with lovely accents of creamy oak and teases with touches of its variety's distinctively floral aspects from beginning to end. It is slightly viscous in feel but very wellbalanced and buoyed by plenty of fruity acidity, and it remains vital and keenly focused throughout. If not demanding of age, it is bound to be better with it, and, whether enjoyed now or later, it is a thoroughly delicious wine that will stand up to richer fare ∽≈ \$45.00 effortlessly. 台

85 ROCK WALL Kristen's Del Arroyo Vineyard 2017

Livermore Valley. A bit of a departure from Viognier's juicier norms and a wine that is relatively muted in varietal character, this one is clean and decently balanced but very much wants for a boost in fruity richness and drifts to coarseness before ending with a dry, slightly citrusy finish. \$20.00 台

86 SOBON ESTATE Amador County 2017

10% Semillon. Edging toward sweetness but moderately fruity, enlivened by acidity and kept on the varietal track by its floral,

slightly honeysuckle-like qualities, this rounded, cleanly made wine is not as ambitious or refined as some Viogniers, but it is tasty and quite likeable all the same and comes at a price that makes it more likeable still. 1 23 **GOOD VALUE** Ð \$16.00

86 STARFIELD El Dorado 2016

Fairly mild-mannered and a tad halting with regard to the sweeter, more floral aspects of Viognier, this bottling smells and tastes of white melons and peaches with background notes of not-quiteripe bananas and wet stones. It is balanced to firmness without getting rigid or stiff and distantly recalls Grenache Blanc by dint of its slightly tighter structure, and it will make versatile drinking with dishes ranging from meaty fish to chicken over the next two ₩ ~ * \$24.00 to three years.

E388 STEELE Lake County 2017

Never dramatic, but always well-focused and gradually conveying more richness, depth and fruity sweetness as it goes, this neatly balanced, medium-full-bodied Viognier shows a deft winemaking hand and a degree of varietal acuity that belies its modest price. Very likeable now but not a wine that insists on early drinking, it will keep nicely for several years and is a veritable bargain that is well worth seeking out.

GOOD VALUE





£ 3£ 3 91 STORYBOOK MOUNTAIN Napa Valley 2017

Structure and polish rather than juicy flambovance have always been the hallmarks of Storybook Mountain's very fine Viogniers, but, once again as is demonstrated here, neither are antithetical to deep and defined fruit. The wine is both weighty and firm with plenty of room for future growth, and, even though young and needing another year two before really coming into its own, it has the varietal credentials and winemaking pedigree to win very enthusiastic recommendation. 🗠 🗫 🗭 \$40.00

86 TERRE ROUGE Fiddletown 2016

On the slightly sparing side in terms of varietal confidence and overall richness, if not in body or weight, this clean and vaguely floral offering is pleasantly rounded in feel, and, while showing a nice measure of juicy fruit on entry, it does not follow through as well as it could and comes up short on the liveliness required for full, one-star endorsement. - R P Ľ. \$25.00

85 TWO SHEPHERDS Saralee's Vineyard 2016

Russian River Valley. The juicier aspects of Viognier are held in abeyance here, and the wine inclines to somewhat more savory traits and shows a stony inflection to its slender, not-guite-ripe fruit. It is a touch thin in feel with firming acidity in play, and, if its minimalist approach may find a few fans, we are left wanting more richness and essential fruit. Sorra Cor 2 \$26.00

E389 ZACA MESA Santa Ynez Valley 2017

This bright and comparatively pert Viognier takes a zestier tack than many, and, while quite light on its feet, it is also very precise in its keenly varietal mix of flowers and peachy fruit. It is mediumbodied with a bare wisp of sweetness that is countered by lots of enlivening acidity that imparts both a wonderfully cleansing freshness to its continuous flavors and the kind of structured firmness to ensure several years of very attractive drinking. GOOD VALUE 鯔 ~~~ p> \$25.00

BEST BUYS IN THE MARKET

SYRAH

Lafond

That Syrah has had its periods of tough-going in the market is not news, but a significant upside to its struggles to gain the broader popularity is that there are plenty of exceptional, surprisingly affordable examples to be had. Leading the way, the 333 93-point V. SATTUI Napa Valley 2016 (\$41.00) is a beautifully crafted Syrah of exceptional polish and depth, and a quartet of outstanding bottlings checking in with 90-point ratings and costing less than \$40.00 strengthens the argument that Syrah just may offer some of the best values around when it comes to serious, very satisfying, local red wines. Among them, the solid, impressively extracted 33 LARNER Estate Grown Ballard Canyon 2016 (\$38.00) and the deeply fruited, close-to-succulent 33 RUSACK Estate Bottled Ballard Canyon 2015 (\$32.00) show why the Ballard Canyon appellation has become renowned for its first-rate Syrahs, and both JEFF COHN'S full and fleshy, Syrah-heavy blend, the 33 Smoke & Mirrors California 2016 (\$25.00) and the varietally

precise, very well-structured (3 LULI Santa Lucia Highlands 2016 (\$20.00) are wines that are deeper, richer and far more interesting than their comparatively modest prices suggest. Look, too, for the intensely spicy (3 LAFOND Hilltop Ranch Sta. Rita Hills 2015 (\$28.00), the juicy, fruitforward (3 SANTA BARBARA WINERY Santa Ynez Valley 2015 (\$20.00), and the tailored, neatly balanced (3 ZACA MESA Santa Ynez Valley 2015 (\$25.00), three fine examples that speak to Santa Barbara County's considerable success with Syrah, while the weighty, well-defined (3 JASON STEPHENS Santa Clara Valley 2012 (\$26.00), the muscular, sturdily built (3 NINE HATS Columbia Valley 2015 (\$25.00) and the ripe and mouthfilling * KLINKER BRINK Farrah Lodi (\$20.00) are convincing reminders that good Syrah is now coming from vineyards up and down the West Coast. Finally, two well-made Syrah-based blends, the perennially successful (3 MORGAN Côtes du Crow's Monterey 2016 (\$20.00) and the spicy, generously fruited (3 ANCIENT PEAKS Renegade Santa Margarita Ranch 2016 (\$26.00) are wines that Syrah lovers with an eye for value will not want to miss.

GRENACHE

Grenache is no longer the peripheral player it once was hereabouts, and the number of tasty, far-from-expensive, Grenache-governed blends increases with each new vintage. Keep an eye out for the bright and buoyant \Im BONNY DOON Clos de Gilroy 2017 (\$20.00) and the insistently juicy \Im MORGAN Côtes du Crows Monterey 2017 (\$20.00) a wine that, in 2017, shifts from Syrah to Grenache as its dominant variety, while fans of heady ripeness and outgoing fruit will find lots to like in the \Im MIRO Cuvée Sasha North Coast 2016 (\$22.00), and, from Rhône variety specialist, the \Im TERRE ROUGE Tête-à-Tête Sierra Foothills 2015 (\$22.00) is a deep and surprisingly complex offering that shows great potential for age. Last, but not least, consider the two GSM bottlings from CASS of Paso Robles as both the supple GSM Geneseo District 2016 (\$25.00) and the slightly sturdier GSM Paso Robles 2015 (\$25.00) are substantial, full-bodied wines brimming with well-ripened fruit.



SAUVIGNON BLANC



Sauvignon Blanc appears to be getting new attention in the market, and, while we will be looking at new releases a couple of months hence, a half-dozen recent favorites from the 2017 vintage bear repeated recommendation while supplies still remain. The keenly focused, lightly grassy \mathfrak{G} 90-point RUSACK Estate Bottled Ballard Canyon 2017 (\$26.00) and the ripe, richly fruity \mathfrak{G} SADDLEBACK Oakville 2017 (\$24.00) are joined by the refreshing \mathfrak{G} NAVARRO Cuvée 128 Anderson Valley 2017 (\$19.50), the crisp, mineral-tinged \mathfrak{G} CALSTAR Russian River Valley 2017 (\$20.00) and the plump, distinctly herbal \mathfrak{G} CASTORO Paso Robles 2017 (\$16.00) among especially priceworthy one-star picks, and the easy-going, 86-point FETZER Echo Ridge California 2017 (\$10.00) is a surprisingly tasty example that is unbeatable at the price.

Connoisseurs' Series



Papapietro Perry Winery

Created by the California Wine Club exclusively for Connoisseurs' Guide readers, and featuring only our two-star and three-star selections, the CONNOISSEURS' SERIES wine-of-the month club makes hard to get wines available for you. Featured this month are: ESB **PAPAPIETRO**



PERRY Pinot Noir Pommard Clones Russian River Valley 2015; SS PAPAPIETRO PERRY Pinot Noir Peters Vineyard Russian River Valley 2015; SS PAPAPIETRO PERRY Pinot Noir Leras Family Vineyard Russian River Valley 2015 and SS BECKMEN Syrah Clone #1 Purisima Mountain Vineyard Ballard Canyon 2016.

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April 2019 Index

CABERNET SAUVIGNON

22 22 22 22 22 22 22 22 22 22 22 22 22	 DRY CREEK VYD Hillside & Benchland DuMOL Montecillo Vineyard DuMOL Napa Valley FLORA SPRINGS Trilogy Napa Valley FORETELL Spring Mountain District FORETELL Spring Mountain District GREAT BEAR Napa Valley GREAT BEAR The Graduate Yolo Co HAWK AND HORSE Red Hills HOWELL MTN VYDS Beatty Ranch HOWELL MTN VINEYARDS Howell Mtn HOYT Paso Robles J. LOHR Cuvée Pau Paso Robles KLINKER BRICK 1850° Red Wine Lodi 	2016 2016 2016 2015 2016 2015 2016 2016 2016 2016 2016 2016 2016 2016	 E LA HONDA Salinian Block I LAIL J. Daniel Cuvée Napa Valley E LAPIS LUNA Lodi I LA STORIA Alexander Valley E LA STORIA Alexander Valley E LUNA Napa Valley E LUNA Napa Valley MAGNOLIA COURT DORRIAN California METTLER Lodi GV Ø MURPHY-GOODE Alexander Valley MINE HATS Red Wine Columbia Valley NINE FATS Columbia Valley NINER Fog Catcher Paso Robles NINER Reserve Bootjack Ranch Ø NINER Reserve Heart Hill Vineyard Ø NORTH BY NORTHWEST Walla Walla Ø PATLAND Select Barrel Reserve Ø PATLAND Proprietary Red Wine Ø PATLAND Proprietary Red Wine Ø RATLAND Stagecoach Vineyard Ø RATLAND Scher Bismark Mountain Vyd Ø RAM'S GATE Winemaker's Cuvée Ø RIDGE Monte Bello Santa Cruz Mtns Ø RODNEY STRONG Reserve GV Ø RODNEY STRONG Alexander Valley 	2016 2016 2016 2016 2016 2015 2016 2015 2016 2015 2016 2015 2016 2016 2016 2016 2016 2016 2016 2016	 B RODNEY STRONG Knights Valley B ROTH Reserve Alexander Valley C ROTH Alexander Valley S ROTH Alexander Valley S SCHWEIGER Spring Mountain District S SCHWEIGER Spring Mountain District S SOJOURN Beckstoffer Vyd Georges III S SOJOURN Oakville Ranch Vineyard S SOJOURN Home Ranch Cuvée SOL ROUGE Red Hills Lake County S SOL ROUGE Red Hills Lake County S OL ROUGE Red Hills Lake County S OL ROUGE Napa Valley T ETRRA VALENTINE K Block T TERRA VALENTINE Forntaingrove T HE WINEYARD HOUSE Oakville T HE WINERY SF North Coast WINA ROBLES Estate Paso Robles WINROC Coyotes Howl Napa Valley M YORKVILLE CLRS Rennie Vineyard M ZD Reserve Napa Valley 	2015 2016 2014 2015 2016 2016 2016 2014 2014 2016 2016 2016 2014 2014 2014 2014 2014 2014 2016 2015 2015
MERLOT						
සි සි සි සි සි	 BENZIGER Sonoma County BLACKSMITH Dry Creek Valley BLUE ROCK Best Barrels BOGLE California BOOTLEG Red Wine Napa County Ø CH. STE. MICHELLE Indian Wells DRY CREEK VINEYARD Meritage W EDUCATED GUESS Napa County W FERRARI CARANO Sonoma County 	2015 2016 2016 2015 2016 2016 2016 2016 2015	 I. LOHR Cuvée POM Paso Robles JOSH California KUNDE Sonoma Valley LARRY HYDE Hyde Vineyard GV Ø MARKHAM Napa Valley GV Ø NINE HATS Columbia Valley GV Ø OBERON Napa Valley PRIDE Napa Valley SCHWEIGER Spring Mountain District 	2015 2017 2015 2015 2016 2015 2016 2016 2016	 B SHOOTING STAR Lake County B STAGS' LEAP WINERY Napa Valley B STERLING Napa Valley B SUMMERS Reserve Knights Valley S UMMERS Reserve Knights Valley B TERRA VALENTINE Spring Mountain B TREFETHEN Oak Knoll District 	2016 2015 2015 2015 2017 2016 2016
CA	BERNET FRANC					
ۍ ټ	 BLUE ROCK Best Barrels COSENTINO The Franc Lodi FIELD RECORDINGS Franc Paso Robles HOWELL MTN VYDS. Howell Mountain J. LOHR Cuvée St.E. Paso Robles 	2016 2017 2017 2015 2015	 B LAVA VINE Napa Valley PRIDE 62% Napa County SCHWEIGER Spring Mountain District SOL ROUGE Red Hills Lake County STEELE Lake County 	2015 2016 2015 2014 2016	 I TERRA VALENTINE Spring Mountain I THE VINEYARD HOUSE Oakville GV Ø WRITER'S BLOCK Lake County Ø YORKVILLE CELLARS Rennie Vineyard 	2016 2014 2016 2016
M	ALBEC					
ය දා දා	 BERRYESSA GAP Yolo County CADARETTA Southwind GRATUS Napa Valley LAVA VINE Napa Valley NINE HATS Columbia Valley 	2016 2015 2015 2015 2015 2015	 Image: Specific Spectral S	2016 2016 2015 2015 2015 2015	 I SUMMERS Sonoma Valley I TREFETHEN Dragon's Tooth GV I TWISTED CEDAR Lodi YORKVILLE CELLARS M-PV 	2017 2016 2014 2015
PE	TIT VERDOT					
ස	 BISHOP'S PEAK Elevation BLUE ROCK Best Barrels HEARST RANCH "Pancho" 	2015 2016 2016	 HOWELL MTN VYDS Howell Mtn IAVA VINE Napa Valley HE FARM The Big Game Paso Robles 	2015 2015 2015	ORKVILLE CELLARS Rennie Vineyard	2015
VI	OGNIER					
දි G දිදි	 ALARA San Benito County BONNY DOON Vin de Glacière CĀPO CREEK Sonoma Coast CAROL SHELTON Wild Thing CLINE North Coast DARIOUSH Napa Valley DuMOL Wild Mountainside 	2017 2017 2017 2017 2016 2017 2016	 GV [∞] BEBERLE Mill Road Vineyard [∞] JASON STEPHENS Central Coast [∞] M JEFF COHN 2 Guys 2 Barrels [∞] GV [∞] LAWER Betsy's Vineyard [∞] PRIDE Sonoma County [∞] ROCK WALL Kristen's GV [∞] SOBON ESTATE Amador County [∞] [∞] SOBON ESTATE Amador County [∞] 	2017 2014 2017 2016 2017 2017 2017	STARFIELD El Dorado GV STEELE Lake County STORYBOOK MOUNTAIN Napa Valley TERE ROUGE Fiddletown STWO SHEPHERDS Saralee's Vineyard GV ZACA MESA Santa Ynez Valley	2016 2017 2017 2016 2016 2017
197						<u></u>

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