CONNOISSEURS' GUIDE to California Wine 3

For those of us whose lives revolve around wine, the arrival of fall marks a time of excited anticipation about the year's harvest, and, though picking for the early ripening varieties began in August, there are still plenty of grapes waiting to come in. This year, it is hard not to remember last October when wildfires raced through many of Northern California's storied growing districts, and, if those memories are indelible, blackened hillsides are green again and, at the risk of invoking bad luck for the varieties still on the vine, the timeless turning of seasons has led to a comparatively worry-free vintage in 2018. So far, as they say, so good. At this point the harvest is shaping up nicely and is in many quarters being referred to as "normal" in an era where the notion of normal has been all but forgotten. Bud break and flowering were not premature, the summer has been temperate and the maddening Labor Day heat spikes suffered in the last several years failed to materialize in this one. The longer, comparatively cooler growing cycle means that grapes can continue to develop character without elevated sugars hastening harvest, and, barring torrential, late-season rains, things do, indeed, look very good. Picking in some places will extend for several more weeks, but the winemakers with whom we have spoken seem an especially relaxed and happy lot and, of course, are already touting 2018 as an excellent year. We see no reason to disagree but, as always, will wait to see what the wines have to say when they finally find their ways to bottle.

SYRAH

An impressive lot of newly arrived Syrahs heads up this month's issue, and, while there continue to be critics of the variety's lack of a signature style in California, we applied its ability to produce memorable wines that range from savory and sleek to substantial and wonderfully rich. It has survived the puzzling and baseless vilification that was too often directed its way, and those who would ignore it are missing out on one of the state's most important vinous gifts.

MERLOT

In too many unfortunate ways, Merlot's falling then rebounding fortunes have paralleled those of Syrah, and its renascent rise to renewed respectability has been long overdue. It is the regular recipient of critical praise in the popular press over the last couple of years, but, as its fans are well aware, there have always been plenty of very good examples to be had. It is once again getting the attention it deserves.

CABERNET FRANC

It was not so long ago that local Cabernet Franc was more often than not tough, tannic and unfriendly with little affinity to the great wines of Bordeaux's right bank, but things have changed in a very big way, and we continue to delight in the surprisingly fine, compellingly complex versions that are beginning to appear with happy regularity.

SANGIOVESE

Tuscany's noble grape has had a difficult time finding a home here in California, and, while it is not a variety that appears to be poised for star-dom in any foreseeable future hereabouts, there are quality examples enough, such as those from Frank Family and Noceto, that it is a variety that we would not choose to do without.

TEMPRANILLO

Tempranillo has generated a quiet buzz among inquiring fans of California wines, and, if still in its early stages of finding a secure local footing, it is a variety whose Spanish success has drawn interest among a small circle of vintners looking to expand the state's vinous horizons and is one that is worth watching.

ROSÉ

Rosé has been and remains on an altogether remarkable marketplace roll of late and has captured the fancy of a new generation of thirsty wine drinkers. Thinking pink is in fashion like never before, and in this, our second installment this year, a bevy of new bottlings shows why.

BEST BUYS

Riesling is not without its fans, but its limited local following means that there are astonishing values galore. A long list of lovelies from up and down the coast is joined this month by a few especially delectable Chenin Blancs and Pinot Noirs in what is an exceptional collection of Best Buys.

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Last week at a trade and media luncheon in Napa Valley hosted by California's Wine Institute, the conversation turned to the usual topics of what is hot in the market — what is selling and what is not — and, in the midst of discussion, we were surprised by a comment from an accomplished, well-known sommelier that Syrah was experiencing what he termed as a "golden age." While Syrah has always had a small, very devoted following in which we include ourselves, it is not often that one hears such flattering statements about what has been a beleaguered variety subjected to too many jokes for too many years. The lunchtime banter quickly and

animatedly turned to a lengthy exchange about Rosé, but the passing praise for Syrah set us to hopefully wondering if times might indeed be changing with respect to the broader public perception of what we have long considered to be one of California's truly great red wines.

Syrah's local ups and downs have been well-chronicled. In the late 1990s, it was the new darling of the market, and California plantings increased tenfold in the years from 1995 to 2000, but far too much was planted in hotter inland climes, and much of what was made was insipid, uninspiring stuff that left discerning wine drinkers uninterested, if not downright disgruntled. Syrah sales soon went through the floor. There were, of course, serious growers and vintners who, inspired by the classic Syrahs of the Rhône and knowing that the climb ahead would be long and without immediate reward, refused to give up the good fight. It is a great irony that during the time in which California Syrah found itself listlessly adrift in the doldrums, the French versions from Côte Rotie and Hermitage made by such names as Jaboulet, Chave and Guigal were fetching astronomical and, for most wine lovers, prohibitive prices and now sell for hundreds of dollars a bottle.

Today, those of us who never abandoned the belief that California Syrah was worth pursuing are beginning to see their faith justified, and, if proclamations that it is entering a new "golden age" might be premature, there is no question but that the local version is making a significant comeback after far too many years of neglect. One of Syrah's great virtues, and a potential drawback as well, is that it will grow almost anywhere, and, as time has gone by, stunning renditions have emerged from widely varied appellations up and down the West Coast. As this month's roster of impressive new bottling attests, the cooler districts of Santa Barbara County, the Santa Lucia Highlands and the Russian River Valley once viewed as being the exclusive provenance of fine Pinot Noir are increasingly responsible for outstanding offerings, and Syrah continues to prove its mettle from the Napa Valley and the Sierra Foothills to the Columbia Valley and Eastern Washington with more than a few adventurous producers in Oregon throwing their hats into the ring. And, we would add, Syrah's sustained struggle for fashionability means that there are any number of extraordinary values to be found

Immediate gratification may have become the norm in the twenty-first century, but great wines and vineyards do not magically appear overnight, and the abiding efforts of its implacable champions are bearing remarkable fruit these days. It may not yet be flying off retailers' shelves and high-quality bottlings may admittedly sometimes demand an extra search, but things are most definitely looking up for Syrah. We have always believed that, sooner or later, they would.

Tasting Note Legend										
OUTSTANDING WINES	CHARACTERISTICS & TRADITIONAL USE WITH FOOD									
E3E33 THREE STARS: (95-98 points) An exceptional wine. Worth a special search of the market. **E3E3** TWO STARS: (91-94 points) A highly distinctive wine. Likely to be memorable. **E3** ONE STAR: (87-90 points) Fine example of a type or style of wine. Without notable flaws. NOTE: Wines not marked with stars are often delightful wines. Each has unique virtues and any of these wines may be the best wine to serve your needs based on value, availability or for your dining and taste preferences. *Prices – Approximately California full retail prices. Connoisseurs' Guide tastings are conducted with **E1E4E4** Stemware.	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. GV 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. Ճ Not suitable for drinking. 									

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POSTMASTER: Please send address changes to: Connoisseurs' Guide [ISSN 0161-6668], P.O. Box 8, Pinole, California 94564.

CONNOISSEURS' GUIDE TO CALIFORNIA WINE is published monthly at 2691 Doidge Avenue, Pinole, California 94564 and is available only by subscription.

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DELIVERY OPTION: The Magazine version is downloadable on the first of the month through our email to you. For those who prefer that Connoisseurs' Guide send a Magazine version via the Post Office (First Class mail), we are pleased to offer that option for an additional \$25 per year.



BECKMEN

BECKMEN Purisima Mountain Vineyard 2016

Ballard Canyon. Santa Barbara County's Ballard Canyon AVA is proving to be an exceptional site for Syrah, and this bottling from Beckmen capably demonstrates what the excitement is all about. It is a big wine by any measure, and it makes no apologies for ripeness, but it is wonderfully deep in defined Syrah fruit and shows the heady richness and wide ranging spice that defines the variety at its best. What is more, it offers extraordinary value and is a wine that belongs at the top of the shopping lists of all who count themselves as serious fans of the grape.

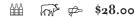
E3E3 BECKMEN Clone #1 Purisima Mountain Vineyard 2016

Ballard Canyon. If anything, a bigger and more powerful wine than its cellarmate listed just above, this is the second of two very impressive Syrahs from Beckmen in 2016. It is a big, full-bore expression of the grape that, like its companion, makes no bones about being very ripe, but, even as it finishes with a catch of last-minute heat, it is immense, blackberry fruit and unrelenting spice that are its enduring message. It will certainly never be accused of timidity and will likely be criticized in some quarters as being over the top, but for all its considerable size and richness, it is a solidly structured, unassailably varietal rendition that promises to age famously.

88 BERINGER The Waymaker Paso Robles 2015

38% Syrah; 24% Cabernet Sauvignon; 15% Petite Sirah; 7% Zinfandel; 16% other. Given its decidedly varied *cépage*, it is hardly surprising that this heady, well-ripened wine is not all that specific with respect to Syrah, but it is rich, generously fruited stuff that gets good marks for both structure and richness. It is fairly full-bodied and brightened by plenty of youthful energy, and, if sure to match up well with savory lamb or beef braises in the short term, it is built to get better with age and will reward another four to six years of cellaring.

GOOD VALUE





CADARETTA

CADARETTA Windthrow Columbia Valley 2015

84% Syrah; 10% Grenache; 6% Mourvèdre. Moderately intense and quite complex right from the first sniff with elements of ripe berries, plums, vanilla, new leather and subtle background notes of dried violets making for an involving varietal nose, Cadaretta's latest Windthrow is a carefully composed, medium-full-bodied Syrah whose layered, long-lasting flavors fully live up to its very considerable aromatic promise. It is not a bombastic wine by any measure, but it wants for nothing in the way of fruity amplitude and is as well-structured as it is so very deep and insistently rich. For all of its manifold appeals at the moment, it will become even more impressive with time and should reach its best some five or six years hence.

(S) 89 CADARETTA Southwind Walla Walla Valley 2015

Big and bold with obvious ripeness as its dominant trait, this hefty, highly extracted Syrah trends dangerously close to stepping over the line into chocolaty excess and cares less about discreet spice and than it does about full-on richness. It is slightly hot and fairly tannic on the back end, but it is also deep in dark-berry fruit, and, if its lack of restraint will be cited as a fault by those who believe that less is more, it will meet with no criticisms for being quiescent or underfilled. Pour it as a foil to hearty hunks of meat, but not until a few years have passed.

(388 CADARETTA Columbia Valley 2015

11% Grenache; 9% Mourvèdre; 2% Viognier. Raspberries, sweet oak and a smattering of peppery spice merge comfortably in the relatively outgoing aromas here and are replayed on the palate, but, while fairly constant in focus, the wine presently drifts to tannin and acid as it goes, and its solid structural bones stick out just a bit in the latter going. It will do the job in washing down savory roasts in the short term, yet it will benefit appreciably by a few years of smoothing.



(32) 93 DARIOUSH Shiraz Napa Valley 2014

Very deep, very solid and a bit brooding on the nose with slowly evolving aromas of fully ripe blackberries and caramel with gentle adjuncts of black pepper, the new Darioush Shiraz holds nothing back on the palate and is an immense mouthful that, for all of its ripeness, its sweet oak and sheer size, is charged by loads of intense and surprisingly energetic fruit. It possesses the signature richness for which Napa Valley is known, and, if its undisguised tannins impart an admittedly gritty edge to its finish just now, it most definitely not a wine meant for drinking up in its youth. Tag it for hiding in a hard-to-reach place in the cellar, and give it a look in a half-dozen or so years.



£389 DRNK Connell Bennett Bench Bennett Valley 2015

Elements of ripe red berries are overlain by a light bit of spice and dusty soil in the mid-density aromas of this one, and, while fairly full on the palate, the wine is balanced to firmness and sports a nice sense of brightness and buoyancy throughout with lifting acidity lending length. It is not a massive wine as Syrahs go, but it displays good stamina and staying power, and its vital, longlasting fruit augers quite favorably for at least few years of additional age.

84 DUTTON ESTATE Cherry Ridge Vineyard 2015

Russian River Valley. It may well be that this narrow, near-wiry wine will find fans among those for whom obvious ripeness is anathema, but the rest of us who believe that good Syrah needs fruity substance to succeed will be less than happy with its penury and unbuffered tartness.



£388 KLINKER BRICK Farráh Lodi 2015

This direct, well-ripened effort may not be the boldest or most explicitly spicy example around, and it may not display guite the depth and reserve of the best of its big-ticket cousins, but it does a very fine job at making an unmistakable varietal statement and possesses lots of juicy, very persistent Syrah fruit. It is supple to start and finishes with a good bit of tannic grip, but it is neither coarse not forbiddingly astringent, and its scant trim of finishing heat will be unnoticeable when enjoyed with food. Best of all, it is an unbeatable bargain that absolutely excels at the price. GOOD VALUE **₩ \$20.00**

£387 LAFOND SRH Sta. Rita Hills 2014

GOOD VALUE

This firmly balanced, moderately full-bodied Syrah is a wine of mixed messages and, while fairly emphatic in ripeness, it gradually gives itself over to stiffening acidity that stands in contrast to its comparatively sweet and juicy start. That said, it boasts plenty of continuous, appropriately spicy, blackberry fruit, and its latterpalate angles and edges are sure to be smoothed by service with food and/or a couple more years in the bottle.

m ≠ \$23.00

£389 LAVA VINE The Poor Ranch Mendocino 2015

20% Zinfandel; 4% Merlot. Showing a nicely balanced mix of black and red berries and spice with mildly peppery top notes and a gentle oak presence first in the nose and then again in its continuous, very like-minded flavors, this full-bodied Syrah comes with no dearth of tannin, but it is never abrasive or too coarse for comfort and never wanders off the fruity track. It is, in fact, sufficiently well-fruited to serve as a foil to savory hunks of meat in the short term, but, given the choice, we would wait for a few more years of integration and smoothing. ** \$45.00



£390 LUCIA Garys' Vineyard Santa Lucia Highlands 2016

More ripe in nose and mouth than its stated alcohol would seem to indicate, this outgoing effort combines slightly brooding fruit smacking of blackberries and black pepper with a suggestion of dark chocolate and a whiff of dried twigs in its layered, if slightly unusual and yet still varietal mix of traits. Full in the mouth and somewhat fleshy but able to avoid becoming heavy, this is a wine well-suited to service with a sturdy leg of lamb liberally studded \$55.00 with garlic.

£388 LUCIA Soberanes Vineyard Santa Lucia Highlands 2016 Sweet and slightly floral in its first impressions with youthful fruit smelling of blackberries and a whiff of strawberry, this nose may not be powerfully Syrah-like, but it is pleasing and available from the outset. The wine is ripe and lively on the palate with a layer of spry acidity lifting its early flavors but somewhat limiting its finish. Withal, the wine is going to find a happy home served with dishes like grilled lamb chops. \$55.00

86 LUCIA Susan's Hill Santa Lucia Highlands 2016

Standing a bit apart from its cellarmates and also from the large

majority of Santa Lucia Highlands Syrahs here, the Susan's Hill bottling is less involving, less concentrated and less varietally on point than most. It is tighter in construction yet less muscular in toto, and, while it is an entirely serviceable bottling, it falls a bit short of the competition on a number of measures and delivers too little to like at the price. ♠ ♠ \$55.00



€3€392 MUELLER Block Eleven Russian River Valley 2016

Precision rather than bombast is very much the story here, and, while lacking for nothing in the way of fruity stuffing and spice, this fleshy, full-bodied youngster impresses most for its varietal definition and careful proportion. It shows unexpected polish for a wine of its age, and its juicier traits are bound to tempt early drinking, but, if free of angles and edges and undeniably tasty now, it is certain to reveal more layering and nuance if allowed a few more years of age and should continue to gain for another half-decade beyond that. ₩ F \$42.00

£389 NINER Reserve Heart Hill Vineyard 2015

Willow Creek District. Juicy, sweet plum and blackberry fruit jumps out to an early lead here and proves the larger message of this well-filled wine from start to finish, and, if the peppery spice of Syrah tends to stay in the background throughout, it never drifts too far from view and provides an indelible varietal stamp to what is a weighty, nicely constructed offering. Integral tannins lend just the right bit of tactile grip without being so rough as to warrant protracted cellaring, but there is no reason to rush to pull this one's cork, and a few years of waiting will be \$50.00 handsomely repaid.

86 NORTH BY NORTHWEST Walla Walla Valley 2015

More measured than muscular, more mild than expressive, this medium-bodied bottling requires a little coaxing before showing its Syrah-spicy side in the nose. There is varietal character to be had here, but the wine is less than fully stuffed on the palate, and is more likely to be seen as a lighter version of the grape with its rise in acidity and a corresponding bit of narrowness in the finish. Withal, it is Syrah, and its character will allow it to be a useful mate to spring lamb chops. 🖺 🖙 🔑 \$40.00

E390 OJAI VINEYARD John Sebastiano Vineyard 2014

Santa Barbara County. There is no dearth these days of socalled cool-climate Syrahs that back well away from overt ripeness, and, although this one does just that and opts for precision over bluster, it still manages to be rich and very specific in its spicy, slightly juicy, blackberry fruit. It is not a big, brawny wine, yet it lacks for nothing in the way of substance and is moderately fullbodied with a slightly supple palatal feel and plenty of fruity vigor. Its overall polish and composed complexity are certain to tempt early drinking, and, while we admit that it is thoroughly enjoyable now, we see more complexity waiting in the years ahead and have no reservations about cellaring it away for another four or £ m ≠ \$49.00 five years.

🗧 3 🔠 OJAI VINEYARD John Sebastiano Vineyard 2016

Sta. Rita Hills. 50% Syrah; 50% Grenache. Measured in its ripeness and sporting a mix of red berries and plums attended by a light smattering of spice in its youthfully energetic aromas, this equal marriage of Syrah and Grenache is a slightly rounded, medium-full-bodied offering that gets the nod for its accessible

fruitiness and lively, yet easy-going manner. It is a wine to tag for drinking before too many years have passed and should be in top form upon reaching its fifth birthday.



PATLAND Stagecoach Vineyard Napa Valley 2015

From front to back, this very well-focused offering keys on explicit Syrah spice and shows plenty of fruity muscle and depth. It is a big wine, to be sure, but never overplays its hand, and it is at once both potent and carefully controlled with the structure to age for years and years. Even though very young and firmed by slightly sinewy tannins, it is surprisingly expressive even now, but the smart money says to put it away for no fewer than three or four years, and waiting for twice that long is guaranteed to pay very handsome dividends.

85 POMAR JUNCTION Paso Robles 2013

Loosely suggestive of dark berries and plums but always a bit pulled back in its expression of fruit and hinting at coffee and a touch of charred wood from start to finish, this bottling begins on a slightly supple note in the mouth then tightens and gives way to unbuffered, truncating tannins that ultimately become its most lasting trait. Although its astringency prescribes age, its hesitant fruit leaves us questioning just how much benefit time will really bring.

QUPÉ Bien Nacido Hillside Estate 2014

Santa Maria Valley. As it has in the past, Qupé's Bien Nacido Hillside Estate Syrah capably proves that complexity and intense, clear-cut varietal character are not limited to mouthfilling wines that are driven by unbridled ripeness. By no means a "small" wine, but one that is drawn along slightly lighter lines and exhibits a nice sense of measured restraint, it is nonetheless quite expressive with elements of dried herbs, new leather and scattered notes of roasted game played against its persistent, yet never forceful dark berry fruit. Even though having reached its fourth birthday, it still has some way to go before reaching its best, and its firm, acid-accentuated tannins make a convincing case for yet another three or four years of age.

QUPÉ Sawyer-Lindquist Vineyard Edna Valley 2014.

Qupé Syrahs rarely, if ever, rely on high ripeness and extract, and this one follows the winery model of relative restraint. It opens with a savory nose of pepper, fresh herbs and subtle fruit and follows in step with firm, similarly herb-tinged flavors that hold obvious fruit quietly in check. Fans of big Syrahs will likely want more than it offers, yet, even if a bit lighter in style, it hits the varietal marks and is balanced to age gracefully for another three or four years.

85 QUPÉ Central Coast 2016

Here, again, is a wine that is dialed back and far from aggressively fruity and, in this case, comes across as being a bit stretched and lesser in clear varietal identity. It might best be described as Syrahlight in character, and its mildly plummy, dried-herb aspects are decidedly subdued throughout.

(39) ROAR Garys' Vineyard Santa Lucia Highlands 2016

Although each of the Roar Syrahs suffer from the sins of extreme youth and are nowhere near ready to drink, they display a shared



sense of fruity muscle and extract that guarantee good things with age. This one starts out with a fairly voluminous, ripe berry nose that is infused with a wealth of peppery spice, and it follows up with lengthy fruity-and-spice flavors that start out on the fuller and riper side but tighten and pull back just a bit as they go. The wine has the right pieces in place to deepen and expand with age, but time is a must, and it needs to be hidden away for no fewer than four or five years.

E399 ROAR Sierra Mar Vineyard Santa Lucia Highlands 2016

Very young and needing a few moments of air to get up to speed but exhibiting fine fruity depth and the specific, slightly gamy spice of Syrah as it does, this well-endowed offering builds on the palate and is, by just a bit, the biggest and most extracted of the three Roar efforts from 2016. It is a solid and sturdy wine that impresses equally for its structure and ample fruit, but it is also one that bears waiting and will not hit its stride until a half-decade has passed.

(388) ROAR Rosella's Vineyard Santa Lucia Highlands 2016

If hardly an outlier in the Roar trio, the Rosella's Vineyard bottling differs a bit insofar as its ample spice and mildly gamy traits get a step or two ahead of its slightly less forceful fruit, and the wine seems a little more backward and closed-in at this point. It is moderately full and fairly firm in construction with nominal tannins ensuring worry-free aging, yet, while it too mandates waiting and promises to age nicely, it presently does not show quite the fruity depth and drive of its two cellarmates.

(39) SEQUEL Columbia Valley 2015

By Long Shadows. 7% Cabernet Sauvignon. Here is a bold, full-scaled Syrah in both size and scope, and, despite its unabashed ripeness, it never wavers in its expression of deep, very pure, mixed-berry fruit and exhibits peppery, varietal spice to spare. It is not a wine of subtlety yet is layered and quite complex all the same, and it never once threatens to lose control. Four or five years of additional cellaring are required if it is to reach its best, and it will be in fine form upon reaching its tenth anniversary. This one is a keeper.

E3 88 SPICERACK Sonoma County 2015

Singularly keyed on ripe berries and showing minimal evidence of Syrah spice on first and second nosing, this bottling slowly finds its varietal bearings and offers up suggestions of smoked meats and pepper as it goes. On the palate, it is solidly structured and reasonably well-extracted, and, while still on the tannic side, it has enough fruity stuffing to offset its youthful astringency and ensure three to five years of positive growth.

SPICY VINES Dragon's Kiss Sierra Foothills 2015

\$25.00

Clearly oriented to ripeness yet abundantly fruity with a full flush of blackberries and spice keeping it convincingly on the varietal track throughout, Dragon's Kiss is a fleshy, fairly big-bodied Syrah that trades refinement for richness. It is nominally tannic and flirts with a bit of noticeable back-end heat, and, if never an elegant wine, it does not cross the line into cumbersome excess and will do satisfying service over the next three or four years with savory, well-seasoned braises and stews.

GOOD VALUE



85 TABLAS CREEK Patelin de Tablas Paso Robles 2016

52% Syrah; 31% Grenache; 11% Counoise; 6% Mourvèdre. On the mild side as Syrah and never quite as fruit-forward as the Côtes du Rhône model that it approximates in character, this wine is clean and entirely serviceable even as it underachieves in the delivery of central stuffing. 5m ₽ \$25.00



£3£391 TERRE ROUGE Ascent Sierra Foothills 2015

Terre Rouge's flagship Syrah is in fine form once again, and, rather than being a wine of immense ripeness and heft, it already shows glimmers of refinement to come. It enters with a flourish of fully ripe fruit before turning down the volume in favor of structured richness, and, even if encroaching, back-end tannins send a very clear warning signal that extra patience is in order, it conveys a careful sense of proportion and varietal precision with the fruity persistence that makes six to eight years of cellaring a proposition \$90.00 entirely free of risk.

£399 TERRE ROUGE High Slopes Sierra Foothills 2015

There is nothing at all subtle about this concentrated, fully ripe offering and finesse is not among its virtues, at least for now, but it is extraordinarily rich and intensely varietal with a wealth of very deep fruit and strident spice showing at every stop. It is fleshy and quite full on the palate with a sturdy, tannic spine that behooves patience, but, even if fairly unruly at this point with a tag-end of late-arriving heat, its potency and depth are beyond question and quarantee that waiting is worthwhile. Set it aside for at least three or four years, and count on better to come for that many more.

E389 TERRE ROUGE Les Côtes de L'Ouest California 2015

There are certainly bigger and bolder Syrahs in the Terre Rouge portfolio, but this comparatively inexpensive, medium-full-bodied version deserves serious notice for its very keen varietal focus and its fruity persistence. It is both rich and fairly light on its feet with neatly-integrated acidity and tannin, and, if a thoroughly tasty youngster as it is, it is balanced to keep and never suggests any need for hasty drinking. Whether enjoyed now or held for three or four years, it is an absolute standout at the price and is highly recommended to fans of the grape who wish they could indulge in good Syrah more frequently than the budget usually allows. ₩ \$22.00 GOOD VALUE

£387 TERRE ROUGE DTR Ranch Fiddletown 2015

Cut from very similar cloth as its companion from the Sentinel Oak Vineyard insofar as it is ripe, nominally spicy and a bit sere at the edges, this full-bodied bottling begins with a rush of wellripened fruit but veers to truncating dryness and, if not forcefully tannic, is closed off by a little more astringency than it needs. By a small margin the arguably better bet for age of the two, it still demands a short leap of faith, one that may or may not be fully justified by time. £ 600 = \$40.00

86 TERRE ROUGE Sentinel Oak Vineyard Pyramid Block 2015

Shenandoah Valley. With enough varietal spice to clearly say Syrah and hinting quietly here and there at suggestions of black and red berries, this weighty effort nonetheless tends to drying coarseness and lags a bit in fruity fullness and strength. While it is sure to grow past its ragged youth with age, it offers no clear guarantee as to future beauty, and cellaring requires a fair degree of hopeful optimism. £ 500 = \$40.00

86 TERRE ROUGE Garrigue Sierra Foothills 2014

66% Syrah; 34% Cabernet Sauvignon. Described by the winery as a week-night wine for drinking with burgers, grilled steaks and the like, the Terre Rouge Garrique is a modestly fruity, mediumfull-bodied blend that flirts with notes of pepper and black tea. Its bent to drying astringency very much prescribes savory red meat dishes as mealtime mates, and, in this outing, it comes up a trifle too tough to pair with lighter fare. L \$22.00

\$\ 3\ 89 VAN DUZER Estate Willamette Valley 2014

If fairly subdued with respect to Syrah's pepper and game aspects, this wine makes a fine first impression with a compelling nose of mixed black and red berries framed with very rich oak that imparts a suggestion of pastry crust sweetness. It similarly stays on the somewhat varietally quiet side of things once in the mouth, and, while it may fall a bit short if strident spice is seen as the proper goal of all Syrahs, it is a pleasantly plush and supple version that earns easy endorsement for its richness and fine fruity depth \$50.00 all the same.

(389 WAXWING Dierberg Vineyard Santa Maria Valley 2016 Although slightly biased to the cool-climate Syrah model and a wine that favors compact structure over sweet and effusive fruit, this youthful offering does a fine job at keeping peppery Syrah spice in its sights at all times and insistently hints at a sense of fruity reserve as it does. It shows good stamina and length on the palate with tailored tannins providing a proper bit of finishing

grip, and, if never a flashy, big-muscle wine, it is sure to unfold with time and should gain in complexity over the coming three \$50.00 to five years.

🗧 🐯 WORKMANAYER de facto Santa Barbara County 2015 80% Syrah; 20% Grenache. Explicitly varietal in its mix of spice and dark berries and earning the nod first for its precision and secondly for its careful balance, this medium-full-bodied version is a fairly stylish Syrah that steers clear of heaviness and shows a slightly lighter winemaking hand but still comes across as being solidly fruity. It inclines to firmness far more than fat and has the structure of a wine that will be wholly sympathetic to food, and, if sure to improve with a few years of cellaring, it offers plenty to like in the near term. \$38.00

Wrath

€3€393 WRATH San Saba Vineyard Monterey 2016

Loaded with blackberry and spicy notes with an underlying hint of minerality, this well-stuffed bottling picks up notes of pepper and game as it opens. Full in body and yet lively and balanced on the palate, it even sports an early suggestion of suppleness with the promise of more to come. It is not quite as open and fleshy

as its mate below, but we look for it to reach further when given a half-decade of age, and, both it and the winery's KW bottling are among the most priceworthy of the high-rated Syrahs.

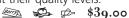
GOOD VALUE

_ \$39.00

K391 WRATH KW Ranch Santa Lucia Highlands 2016
Nominally listed at the same alcohol level (14.7%) as the wine above this one is the fleshier and more open of the two. Its first

above, this one is the fleshier and more open of the two. Its first aromatic impressions of sweet berries and more-than-ample Syrah spice come with full fruity support, and that ripe, explicitly varietal character is repeated on the palate. The many parts of this wine fit together in a seamless way making for a more directly drinkable effort than the San Saba bottling. Both count as major successes and are more than reasonably priced at their quality levels.

GOOD VALUE



(2) WRATH Destruction Level Monterey 2016

50% Syrah; 50% Grenache. As colorful as its title may be, there is nothing about this juicy blend that is the least bit muscular or ferocious. Indeed, it is a ripe, open, round, strawberry-scented bottling with adequate fruit and limited but evident tannins. It is certainly an enjoyable wine—just not likely to destroy anything

now or in the next few years.



86 WRITER'S BLOCK Lake County 2015

Forthrightly fruity with a certain red-berry piquancy to its aromas that is reiterated in its bright and lively, mid-density flavors, this clean, firmly balanced, slightly scaled down Syrah flirts here and there with distant suggestions of spice and stiffens just a bit as it goes. It is presently a touch tart and a tad astringent at the finish, but its acidity and nominal tannins will be better integrated once a couple of years have passed, and the wine can be counted as a modest success that is well worth its asking price.

GOOD VALUE

m ≠ \$18.00

(S) YORBA Shake Ridge Vineyards Amador County 2011

Yorba chooses to wait until it sees the time to be right before sending its wines to market, and this seven-year-old Syrah is the winery's current release. It smells of black cherries, strawberries and a hint of sweet soil and follows with like-minded flavors that are buoyed by a brightening streak of acidity, and, if not quite as big and meaty as the classic varietal model might predict, it is a lithe and lively offering with the balance to serve successfully with tonight's rack of lamb.

Merlot

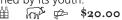
Maybe it took a new generation of inquisitive wine drinkers for Merlot to regain the market traction it once had. Much like Syrah, but to a greater extent, it suffered a fall from grace some fifteen years back, yet it has regained a fair share of its former cachet in recent years. We are not at all surprised. Good Merlots, and there are many, can be every bit as rich and interesting as Cabernet Sauvignon

without the latter's dissuasive burden of tannin. Although wines made from Merlot most certainly can age, they are typically more fruity and forthcoming and thus are easier to enjoy in their early years. A considerable number of its advocates have banded together and formed the #MerlotMe consortium (http://www.merlotme.com/) to promote their favorite grape, and the organization rightfully and very vocally aims to make sure that Merlot gets more than the occasional sideways glance.

(387 ANCIENT PEAKS Santa Margarita Ranch 2016

12% Petite Sirah. Generosity rather than nuance is the story here, and, if this ripe and mouthfilling wine may not earn applause for range and complexity, it earns the nod for its outgoing fruit and juicy abundance. Its wide-open aromas of cherry cola flirt with a bit of candied confection, but it stays clear of palpable sweetness in the mouth and finds a streak of balancing, back-palate acidity just when it is needed. Yes, it is arguably simple, but it is also rich, very easy to taste and not at all constrained by its youth.

GOOD VALUE



84 ANGELINE Reserve Paso Robles 2016

Smelling lightly of dried herbs and less of fruit with fairly sparse flavors to match, this underfilled offering is insistently reedy in character and surprisingly dry for a wine of its age. Its evident acidity and tactile tightness might be reflective of its youth, but it skimps on fruity stuffing to the point that it is hard to muster any optimism about its ability to age into better.

86 BENZIGER Sonoma County 2014

Here is a clean, fairly straightforward, somewhat mild-mannered look at Merlot that proffers up-front, cherry-like fruit with minimal firming tannins. It is medium-full-bodied and slightly viscous on entry but trends away from softness as it goes and closes with a trailing touch of dried herbs accenting its likeable and lingering, easy-to-access fruit.

87 BONTERRA Equinox Red California 2016

It is in Merlot's nature that it can be friendly and open when it gets ripe, but only if the wine has not lost its basic fruit energy.

Bonterra.

VINEYARDS

In this so very priceworthy effort, the light and lithe side of the grape has come forward in a medium-bodied, somewhat round and smoothly textured form with more than enough direct juice at its disposal to make it into a very inviting everyday quaff.

GOOD VALUE

£ 5 \$16.00

E387 CAKEBREAD Napa Valley 2015

Slightly dusty, dark cherry fruit is the centerpiece of this one's ample, oak-enriched aromas and is joined by suggestions of leather and loam with a brief bit of air. For the most part, the wine follows suit on the palate but gradually drifts away from fruit with a late-arriving edge of woodsy dryness truncating its finish, and it argues for a few years in the bottle before making good on its aromatic promise.

84 CASTLE ROCK Paso Robles 2016

Although not without character, this wine is far from specific with respect to Merlot definition. Its diffuse mix of smoke, herbs and amorphous ripeness leave it wide of the varietal mark, and it sits a bit heavily on the palate with fairly sere, unbuffered tannins besting its half-hearted fruit.

Merlot

85 CASTORO Paso Robles 2016

14% Petite Sirah; 11% Malbec. Moderately fruity with a scant trim of earth and herbs to its clean, loosely cherryish aromas, this midsized Merlot slowly wanders off the varietal path and is cut off at the finish by fairly gruff tannins that need a bit more buffering than its nominal fruit provides. Allow for another year or two of softening and pair it with heartier fare when it comes time to pull its cork.



(CHATEAU STE. MICHELLE Columbia Valley 2015)

Very much keyed on the grape's dark cherry qualities and a solidly varietal effort from its slightly juicy aromas and nicely filled flavors to its patently supple texture and integral, fine-grained tannins, Chateau Ste. Michelle's entry-level offering is a deftly balanced wine that may admittedly lack the fancy extras of its high-priced cousins, yet its fruity generosity and unwavering varietal focus make it a particularly priceworthy example of well-made Merlot. GOOD VALUE

86 CHATEAU STE. MICHELLE Indian Wells 2015

Columbia Valley. The winery's Indian Wells wines are intended, according to their maker, to be ripe and forward in fruit as befits their warmer-climate origins, and, if this wine is both, it is also a tad heavy and slightly hot, and it pulls up a bit short with flavor-shortening tannins contrasting its rounded, close-to-plush palatal beginnings. It is not without fruit, and it shows a fair degree of richness, but it could do with a boost in brightness and a little more bounce in its step.

E387 CLOS LA CHANCE Central Coast 2016

Those who measure a wine's success by fancy oak and layered complexity are bound to be disappointed here, yet, where this not-so-ambitious wine does succeed is in its delivery of honest, nicely defined Merlot fruit. Although it must plead no contest to charges that it lacks big-ticket seriousness and brooding potential, its fruity resilience is more than commendable for a wine of its price, and, although its careful balance suggests that it possibly might grow for another two or three years, it is a tasty morsel that is hard not to like now.

GOOD VALUE

£ m ≠ \$17.00

85 CLOS LA CHANCE Reserve Central Coast 2013

Surprisingly fresh and lively for Merlot of its age but a bit narrow and cramped as well, this bottling is hemmed in by acidity and the variety's typically supple feel goes missing. Its initial impressions of youthful, cherry-like fruit diminish rather than deepen as its flavors progress, and it winds up on the stiff and slightly tootannic side at the end.

86 COHO Michael Black Vineyard Coombsville 2014

7% Cabernet Sauvignon; 7% Petit Verdot. Ripe and a tad herbal with a slight piquant edge also in its aromatic mix, this wine is more than a little bit concentrated and has lost some of its basic

fruitiness along the way. Its fruit does reflect Merlot's tilt towards red cherries and there is a quiet layer of oak in the background. Its early succulence at entry does, however, drift into a slight stiff and tart quality as it finishes.

86 COLUMBIA CREST H3 Horse Heaven Hills 2015

Here is a wine that, while less than forcefully fruity, smells and tastes clearly of Merlot cherries, and it has the slightly supple feel that makes the variety so approachable in its youth. It shows a mild streak of supportive tannins with nary a hint of limiting astringency, and it is, all in all, an affable, ready-to-drink effort that is easy to like at the price.

GOOD VALUE

84 COURTNEY BENHAM Central Coast 2016

Soft, ripe and diffuse with what is at best a tentative sense of Merlot character and slightly "roasted" in character, this lackluster offering drifts steadily to dryness and loses what little fruit it has thus allowing an edge of stalky bitterness to come forward in its rather washed-out finish. It may be young, but it is a wine with nowhere good to go.



(35) 91 DARIOUSH Napa Valley 2014

Intense, fully ripe and sporting lots of sweet oak but short of being overblown in any way, the Darioush Merlot is as deep in well-defined fruit as it is long on its maker's signature richness. It is a big wine, but it is a very well-structured one with integral tannins lending fine structural grip without detracting from its distinctly varietal suppleness, and, if its fruity potency is easy to appreciate even now, this is a lavish Merlot that will age beautifully and add layers of complexity as it does. It deserves at least a few years of patience and strikes us as being well worth hiding away for a good half-dozen and more.

86 DECOY Sonoma County 2016

By Duckhorn. If reasonably well-focused on the cherry-like fruit of Merlot and sporting both a touch of sweet oak and a scant smattering of dried herbs as the variety can do, this still slightly withdrawn effort backs away from its initial fruity purpose and bares its youthful structural bones in the late going. It is not all that tannic and does not beg for a lengthy stay in the cellar, but it is fairly tight and cannot but benefit from an additional year or two of unfolding. \$25.00

E388 DUEVIGNE Private Reserve Pettigrew Vineyard 2016

Coombsville. Moderately intense aromas of dark cherries and berries set the stage nicely for what follows here, and, while the wine is still somewhat constrained by its extreme youth, it shows a good deal of depth and keen Merlot focus from front to finish. Much is made about Merlot's ability to be friendly and easy to drink almost as soon as it is bottled, and, if there are versions are just that, this one is not. It may not be overly tough or tannic, but its structured solidity commends at least a few years of waiting with a richer, more open, fairly complex wine as the guaranteed reward.

(387 ESTANCIA Central Coast 2016

Even though it is priced for everyday drinking and with the ready admission that it comes with no prospect of growing complexity if quietly cellared away for years, this nicely focused, very well-fruited wine is nonetheless likely to win smiles from all but the pickiest and most critical Merlot lovers. It touches all of the right varietal bases from its central theme of lightly herbed cherries to its supple palatal presence and its comfortably fit tannins, and, if far from forcefully potent, it is a thoroughly likeable wine that is as fruity at the finish as it is at the start.

85 FERRARI-CARANO Sonoma County 2014

Fully ripe but lagging a bit when it comes to clear-cut fruit and on the comparatively coarse side in construction with exposed tannins and evident heat roughing things up after its slightly rounded start, this wine never manages to get more than one foot over the varietal line and, in the end, sacrifices Merlot clarity to pushy ripeness.

86 FETZER Eagle Rock California 2016

What you get here is a basic, easy-drinking, ripe cherry-oriented, moderately rich, medium-full-bodied effort with enough tannin to provide some useful grip for service with burgers and even alongside simply prepared steaks. Do not look here for a deep, complex bottling with layered flavors and great potential for the future. Rather, this is a likeable \$10 bottle of wine for tonight.

GOOD VALUE



FLORA SPRINGS

E389 FLORA SPRINGS Napa Valley 2015

The fifth in a string of well-made Merlots dating back to the 2011 vintage, Flora Springs's latest appellation bottling begins with well-defined varietal aromas wherein abundant black cherry fruit is overlain by slightly sweet notes of dusty earth and the lightest suggestions of dried herbs, and its ample, yet never heavy flavors follow without missing a beat. The wine is moderately full and fit with enough tannin to make a good case for a few additional years of age, but it is far from rough and rugged and will serve in a pinch now with the likes of a juicy, rare rib-eye steak hot off the grill.

86 FREI BROTHERS Sonoma Reserve Sonoma County 2016

Seemingly extracted but a little slow to find its fruity bearings and hinting lightly at spiced cherries with the accent on spice in the nose, this slightly chunky youngster is a little rough and ragged at the edges just now, and it reiterates the same sensations of extract in its solid, if slightly nascent flavors. It is neither outsized nor too tannic for its own good, but it needs another year or two to coalesce and round into shape.

85 GAINEY Santa Ynez Valley 2014

Vaguely suggesting dried berries more than the typical cherry-like fruit of Merlot and showing decidedly a brushy bent both in the nose and on the palate, this mid-sized working refuses to come into keen varietal focus at any point and winds up fairly dry and slightly chalky at its close.

86 GHOST PINES Winemaker's Blend 2015

88% Sonoma County; 12% Napa County. Reasonably well-defined as Merlot in the nose with an herbal grace note or two

to its nominal black cherry fruit, this nicely ripened, medium-full-bodied effort puts a good first foot forward on the palate as well, but its back-end combination of acidity and noticeable tannin leaves it a little rough at the moment and, if bound to be helped by service with food, it will benefit even more by another year or two in bottle.

(387 GRGICH HILLS Napa Valley 2015

If starting out with a well-defined and fairly outgoing varietal nose of ripe cherries and plums accented by a light bit of oak and a distant suggestion of herbs, this wine proves to be far less forward and engaging once in the mouth. It teases with a quick rush of fruit on entry and then tightens straightaway with acid-pushed astringency trumping the suppleness that Merlot typically predicts. Happily, it does not wholly let go of its grasp on fruit, but it needs to loosen up and relax, and its endorsement comes on the condition that it be set aside and cellared for no fewer than three or four years.

85 HAYES VALLEY Central Coast 2016

By Clos La Chance. Identifiably Merlot on the nose insofar as it smacks of cherries and herbs and is varietally on track in both flavor and feel with but a light streak of tannin lending a touch of grip, this mid-sized effort admittedly stints on the concentration and richness that mark its more ambitious, big-ticket cousins, yet, if on the smaller-scaled side, it is hard not to like at the price.

GOOD VALUE

86 HEARST RANCH "Pico Creek" Paso Robles 2015

22% Malbec. More savory than sweet and not a Merlot that races headlong to fruit, the Hearst Ranch version is a ripe and moderately full-bodied wine that, while having a fair sense of palatal weight, wants for a bit more fruity concentration and better varietal focus to win unqualified recommendation. That said, it is balanced to take a few years of age and has at least an even chance of filling out with time.

£389 JEAN EDWARDS Oak Knoll District 2016

Fairly ripe and a tad fleshy in feel because of it, this full-bodied bottling delivers outgoing aromas of cherries and cassis, and its early scents are all but met in full on the palate. It is generous and solidly constructed, and were it not for a wayward notation of dried grapes in the background, it would have garnered more enthusiasm than it does. That said, it is a rich, tasty Merlot with room for growth over time.



£399 J. LOHR Cuvée POM Paso Robles 2014

82% Merlot; 18% Malbec. The 2014 version of J. Lohr's homage to Pomerol is a textbook expression of Merlot suppleness that shows a nice bit of herbal complexity while keying first and last on the juicy, black cherry fruit of the variety. It is fairly full on the palate with a well-sustained impression of accessible richness, and its fine-grained foundational tannins afford just the right degree of grip. It is a cohesive and wholly satisfying wine now, yet, if it does not demand a great deal of age, neither is it about to fade away anytime soon and can be cellared with confidence for another five years.

Merlot

🕄 🗐 J. LOHR Los Osos Paso Robles 2016

13% Malbec; 1% Petite Sirah; 1% Cabernet Sauvignon. There are a number of invitingly priced Merlots in this issue, and while the Los Osos bottling is not the least expensive of the bunch, it is clearly the leading effort when one is looking for a wine that will not be embarrassed alongside nearly all of the high-priced crew. This one is rich and ripe, layered and outgoing with juicy fruit smelling of ripe cherries and sweet plums all filled out nicely by crème brûlée oakiness. It is gains a nice bit of backbone from its other varieties and, in addition to being attractive for current drinking, can be put away in the cellar for a few years.

84 KUNDE Sonoma Valley 2014

More herbal than fruity and hinting vaguely at dust and browned leaves with a penchant to dryness and a shortfall in freshness, this dull and tiring effort has given up whatever life it once might have had, and, if still propped up by tannin, it misses the fruity point of Merlot.

[38] LA STORIA Block 500 Alexander Valley 2015

By Trentadue. Fresh and fruity with a steady fix on the cherry-like traits of Merlot and a fair bit of bounce in its step, La Storia's Block 500 offering is a nicely tailored middleweight that trades on fruit rather than pushy ripeness, high extract or lavish oak. It is pleasantly balanced with a modest spine of firming tannin but is free of the kind of astringency that mandates cellar time, and, while it will make for friendly drinking in the near term, it should keep comfortably for several years.



(35) MOONE-TSAI Hillside Blend Howell Mountain 2015

50% Merlot; 50% Cabernet Sauvignon. No one will ever accuse this winery of making wines that are short on concentration and richness. In this 50/50 combination of Bordelais varieties, it has captured the best of both with the sturdiness of Cabernet and its deep, tight fruit melded smoothly with the juicier, rounder taste of Merlot. That the wine is ripe and full-bodied is no surprise as that is the Moone-Tsai imperative, and that the wine is a runaway success is no surprise either given the winery track record. It is probably drinkable in just a few years, but we would suggest that it sit in the cellar for up to a decade.

€3® ONCE & FUTURE Sangiacomo Vineyard 2016

Sonoma County. Depending on one's preference of style, this mid-sized Merlot will be seen as being a bit underplayed or just about right. It begins with pert, but somewhat subdued aromas of cherries and dried brush and similarly eschews overt richness in favor of lively, yet narrow, red cherry- and berry-like fruit in its very young-tasting flavors. Suppleness will have to wait, if it is, in fact, to appear, and, even allowing for a bit of expansion with age, the wine looks to remain relatively restrained and will appeal more to fans of subtlety and detail rather than to those looking for Merlots of substance and size.

€387 PEDESTAL Columbia Valley 2015

By Longshadows. 15% Cabernet Sauvignon; 2% Malbec; 2% Petit Verdot. An intriguing aromatic mix of fully ripened black cherries, rich oak, notes of fresh earth and a hint of dried orange peel makes for an inviting start here, yet, on the palate, the wine steers more to high ripeness than anything else and takes a turn to aggressive tannins with trailing heat at the finish. It wants for nothing in the way of substance and richness but is too tough for drinking anytime soon, and its fundamentally rough-cut nature suggests that, even with cellaring, Merlot's signature suppleness may well remain elusive. \$65.00



😭 🗐 PRIDE Reserve Claret 62% Sonoma County 2015

38% Napa County. 60% Merlot; 39% Cabernet Sauvignon; 1% Petit Verdot. The expected toughness and long-aging needs of this wine are not anything new. It is often among those with the most potential in the long run, and so it is here as well. But, often that potential is met with a bit more juice and richness than is on offer here, and we will admit to a bit of doubt as to the full and complete evolution of this edition. Half a decade of cellaring will tell the tale, and fans of the wine are certainly going to give it a chance.

E388 PRIDE Vintner's Select Cuvée Sonoma County 2015

Following in the footsteps of its pricier sibling above, this ripe but slightly dry effort keys on black cherries with hints of berries and sweet oak for its central character. Not surprisingly, it is also full in body and fairly firm with a need for several years of aging to give its still somewhat reluctant fruit a chance to come fully into its own as its gritty tannins recede.

84 PULL Paso Robles 2014

Fairly murky and muddled, if not dirty, in scent with but a vague sense of fruit hiding behind its odd, smoked-meat aromas, this soft, slightly viscous wine never manages to get on a clear varietal track, and its all-too-similar, fruit-deficient flavors quickly give up to drying, almost powdery tannins.

83 RADIUS Washington 2016

Ripe, slightly watery and somewhat generic in smell, this soft and fundamentally lifeless wine never manages to say Merlot in any tangible way, and, while it can be defended as being clean, its sweet and cheap-tasting flavors make it no bargain however inexpensive it may be.

83 RAYWOOD Central Coast

15% Petite Sirah; 5% Carignane; 5% other. Although this nonvintaged bottling may identify itself as Merlot, it evokes little in the way of the variety's texture or forthright fruit and is, instead, a lean and scrawny wine that smacks of candied confection at one moment and sour cherries the next. It is inexpensive, but that is just how it tastes.

86 RUTHERFORD RANCH Napa Valley 2015

Leaning at present to Merlot's slight brushy, dried-herb side and not quite as forthcoming in fruit as the variety is wont to be, this slightly rounded, reasonably well-balanced middleweight is not among the richer renditions around but still manages to aim in

the right varietal direction with some confidence. Its nominally tannic bones are exposed as it shades to dryness at the finish, but it will provide useful drinking with any number of meaty entrees in the near- to mid-term.

STEWART

£3£391 STEWART Tartan Napa Valley 2015

56% Merlot; 34% Cabernet Sauvignon; 10% Petit Verdot. It does not take an imaginative leap to see the Merlot component in this deep, very substantial, multi-faceted working, yet black cherry fruit is only one of its many traits and is joined by elements of cassis, juicy plums and creamy oak in both scent and taste. The wine's tannic solidity is easily explained by its considerable percentage of Cabernet and Petit Verdot, but it is never harshly astringent and, to the contrary, displays the first signs of polish

that are intriguing harbingers of a rich and mannerly future some half-dozen years hence.

E388 STEWART Napa Valley 2014

It is wise to remember that good Merlot can be both fruity and herbal, and, while the latter may be frowned upon by some, those who accept a touch of green as being varietally germane will find a good deal to like in this deep, demonstrably ripe and fairly gutsy, young wine. While it is not so astringent as to give rise to worries about its future, it nonetheless finishes with more than enough conspicuous tannin to warn off hasty drinking and is best left alone in a guiet corner of the cellar until three or four years have come and gone. £ 66 540.00

86 WHITEHALL LANE Napa Valley 2015

8% Cabernet Sauvignon. Mildly reedy and briefly hinting at cherry candy although slightly sparing in fruit on the nose, this firmly balanced, medium-full-bodied bottling musters a better fruity presence once in the mouth, albeit still a bit nervy and youthfully astringent. Service with food should prove a boon if it is to be poured any time soon, and it will benefit further by a couple of ₩ F \$28.00 years in the cellar.



Cabernet Franc Earlier this year in our April edition, we expressed happy excitement at the improving state of California Cabernet Franc, and the dozen new releases featured this month only add to our enthusiasm at just how far the variety has come. Most of the wines earned

starred recommendation and are ageworthy efforts that promise to repay cellaring, and several, most notably those from Blackbird, Corison and Daou, are wonderfully complex, deeply filled versions that can stand with the finest Cabernet Francs hailing from anywhere in the world. California collectors obsessed with what is new need look no further than this year's line-up of new Cabernet Francs.

E387 ANDIS Hawk Creek Vineyard 2015

Sierra Foothills. Assuming the solidity and sturdy stance of Cabernet Franc right from the start yet avoiding the overbearing astringency that can hamper its variety's typically dark and dusty fruit, this bottling from the Sierra Foothills is a well-extracted, full-bodied version that shows a complexing trim of forest-floor spice to its mix of black and red cherries. It is built to take some age but is no tannic brute, and three to five years of waiting will \$40.00 see it through to its best.

£3£394 CORISON Helios Sunbasket Vineyard St. Helena 2015

Given its maker's track record of producing rich but fairly refined Cabernet Sauvignons, it should come as no surprise that this wine shows a sense of sophistication and careful tailoring that sets it well part from the somewhat burlier norm of most of its varietal



mates. It eschews blustery ripeness in favor of claret-like restraint, yet it is amazingly deep in fruit and, although it is tightly structured and in clear need of time, its fruity stamina and implicit layering are guarantors of great things to come. Some wines age on the strength of their potency, while others, such as this, by dint of proportion and balance, and we are not in the least hesitant in predicting no less than a decade of steady improvement for this beautifully crafted offering. \$100.00

SSS 95 BLACKBIRD Paramour Napa Valley 2015

93% Cabernet Franc; 5% Merlot; 2% Cabernet Sauvignon. If quite young and a little closed-in on first nosing, the latest edition of Paramour does not take long in revealing an absolute wealth of very deep, slightly juicy, dark cherry fruit along with a building impression of richness that continues throughout its length. It is wonderfully layered with creamy oak, suggestions of briar and loam and a note of dried herbs all in play, and, from its very keen and unwavering focus to its exemplary structure, it ranks with the most accomplished Cabernet Franc bottlings to be found. It is an eminently collectable wine of considerable pedigree, but its enthusiastic endorsement comes with the urging that it be allowed plenty of cellar time, and it can be counted on to age famously for a decade or more. \blacksquare n > 135.00

Gabernet Franc

DAOU

VINEYARDS & WINERY

E35 91 DAOU Seventeen Forty Reserve Paso Robles 2016

50% Cabernet Franc; 50% Merlot. On the one hand showing the solidity and black fruit of Cabernet Franc, but with the supple and fleshy traits of Merlot mitigating any tendency to hardness, Daou's Seventeen Forty is a deep and impressively concentrated wine that is long on juicy ripeness, savory spice and very rich oak. It is not without a fair measure of tannin, and it toughens up a bit as it crosses the palate without compromising its generous fruit, but it promises to come into its own before too many more years have passed and should be nearing its peak form a half-decade or so hence.

86 EASTON Monarch Mine Vineyard Sierra Foothills 2015

Cabernet Franc can be fairly tough even when it has ample fruit, and this one makes just that point. It is ripe and fairly rich on the nose with touches of woodsy spice, loamy soil and a wispy note of green olives as adjuncts to its central theme of black cherries all of which are held into its dense, somewhat unrefined flavors, but gruff and gritty tannins ultimately win out in the finish and look to remain in place even when the wine's fruit starts to fade a half-dozen years hence.

(38) HEARST RANCH "Lone Tree" Paso Robles 2016

24% Petit Verdot. Undisguised ripeness may drive this one from beginning to end, yet the wine boasts a good deal of fruity energy and does not let ripeness become its singularly defining trait. It is a sizeable mouthful and is, at this point, fairly burly stuff that makes no pretense to refinement, but, even in its tannic youth, it speaks clearly to fruit. The time for drinking lies some years ahead, and it should be set aside until it reaches at least five or six years of age.



MADROÑA

E387 MADROÑA El Dorado 2014

Elements of woodsy spice and a touch of both chocolate and dark earth merge with merge with a good bit of cassis and blackberry fruit in the nose here, and, if the wine leans to ripeness and is roughed up by tannins once in the mouth and ends with a tag end of heat, it does not let go of its firm grasp on essential fruit. Elegance would seem to lie out of its reach regardless of age, but additional aging it needs, and a few years in the cellar will provide some much-needed smoothing.

£388 NINER Reserve Heart Hill Vineyard 2014

Willow Creek District. 10% Malbec; 3% Cabernet Franc. Dusty soils, quiet suggestions of dried herbs and a wee hint of coffee

all emerge as adjuncts to fairly forward, fully ripe cherries and currants in its mid-density aromas, and, while the wine tastes continuously of expected fruit and exhibits fine concentration, it tightens rather than expands on the palate and is less outgoing in flavor than its nose might suggest. Its problems, however, are less those of content than they are of drawn-in youth, and we see this one unfolding and increasing its reach some three to five years further on.

\$65.00



(389 PINE RIDGE Napa Valley 2015

Ripeness abounds in this big-bodied working, but so, too, does plenty of deep, well-concentrated, black cherry fruit, and the wine is filled out with a generous helping of sweetening oak. It is less concerned with finesse than with hard-charging richness and lets a touch of heat come into play in its moderately tannic finish, but its ragged edges are sure to diminish with time, and it will shape up as a satisfying partner to hearty beef and lamb dishes with a few years in the bottle and should continue to improve for a few more.

E399 PRIDE 76% Napa County; 24% Sonoma County 2015

7% Cabernet Sauvignon; 3% Merlot. From its deep and nicely composed aromas of cassis, cherries and sweet oak to it lengthy, very like-minded flavors, Pride's Cabernet Franc matches richness with fruity brightness and comes up a winner in terms of balance and energy. It is fairly full-bodied and slightly fleshy in feel with undisguised tannins lending welcome structural grip, but even in its youth, it stays clear of harsh astringency and impresses with its vitality and length. Three or four years of patience are highly commended here, and we have every expectation that it will grow gracefully for a good many more.



E387 ROCK WALL Holbrook Mitchell Vineyard 2016

Yountville. Sporting a nicely sustained mix of red and black fruit throughout and enriched by a sympathetic dollop of sweet oak, Rock Wall's is a medium-full-bodied offering that hints lightly at the briar and dried-twig traits common to Cabernet Franc. It is not a big beefy wine, but it is slightly fleshy in feel and sports a firm, tannic spine, and, at a mere two years of age, it one to set aside for three or four more.

85 RUCKSACK Sierra Foothills 2016

Mildly herbal, with a slight evergreen edge to its comparatively muted, indistinctly fruity aromas and similarly sparing in the fruit needed to buffer its nominal tannins, this medium-full-bodied Cabernet Franc manages to toe the varietal line, but it never goes beyond the basics and wants for increased fruity depth to earn its ways into recommended ranks.

rangiovese

As many of its new advocates discovered in the short lived "Cal-Ital" movement in the 1990s, Sangiovese is a vigorous producer that demands attention in the vineyard, and, like any variety, if it is to yield anything more than a simple red wine, it needs to be planted in the right places, places that might produce far more profitable Cabernet Sauvignon or Pinot Noir for example.

As a result, its local plantings have decreased by half since the turn of century, yet, as is the case with so many out-of-the-mainstream grapes, there are tasty, well-made versions that are worth seeking out.



(387 DEERFIELD Sonoma County 2013

8% Zinfandel; 7% Cabernet Franc; 6% Cabernet Sauvignon. Bigger and riper than is the norm for Sangiovese yet pretty much on the varietal point with respect to its slightly dusty, red cherry aromas and at least as rich on the palate as it is in the nose, this ample offering shows a spot of late-arriving woody dryness that is easily explained by its forty-month stay in oak, but its plummy, near-jammy fruit persists all the same. There is not much in the way of polish or finesse here, but there is certainly no shortage of richness, and, if the wine is to show its best, it will need pairing with appropriately big-flavored foods.

(387 DUE VIGNE Sierra Foothills 2016

Readily identifiable as Sangiovese from its first, slightly dusty, red cherry sniff and staying in clear focus from there with scattered suggestions of tea and soft spice emerging as its mid-depth flavors unfold, this ever-so-slightly tannic effort hits the varietal mark as far as fruity brightness is concerned. If certainly capable of keeping for a couple of years, it is ready to enjoy now and will drink nicely with lighter, tomato-influenced dishes and most any pasta so long its sauce is red.



\$\frac{6}{2015}\$ FRANK FAMILY Reserve Winston Hill Vineyard 2015

Rutherford. A different look at Sangiovese and not one that would be our first choice for accompanying tomatoey pastas, the Frank Family Reserve is a bigger and more substantial rendition than most with a full measure of extracted blackberry and plum fruit framed by plenty of rich oak and underpinned by a streak of decidedly grippy tannins. Although not so astringent that it cannot be enjoyed in its youth, it will clearly benefit for at least a few years of bottle age and promises to keep growing for a half-dozen or more.

86 NINER Paso Robles 2015

8% Barbera; 7% Malbec; 5% Syrah. With a light veneer of dry earth sitting gently atop its direct, cherry-like aromas and following much the same path on the palate, this supple and softly balanced Sangiovese lacks for the acidy snap and buoyancy that the variety more often than not shows. While cleanly made and moderately fruity, it is arguably a little complacent, and it closes with a bit of chalky dryness and a scant touch of heat punctuating its midlength finish.



E399 NOCETO Riserva Barrel Select Shenandoah Valley 2015

Sporting the same, very pure, red cherry fruit of its lesser-priced mate but fully deserving of its "Riserva" designation by virtue of its extra depth and its uncommon polish, this deftly balanced bottling confidently hits all of the right varietal marks and does so with a sense of grace and complexity that sets it apart. It is a wine of quiet authority rather than one that relies on muscle and mass, and, if already delicious, it will age famously owing to its careful composition. It is, in every way, a class act and shows a degree of refinement that very few Sangioveses achieve.

GOOD VALUE \$29.00

E387 NOCETO Amador County 2015

Here is a no-frills Sangiovese with a good, well-sustained fix on the slightly dusty, tart cherry fruit of the variety, and it is charged with plenty of zesty acidity. Its medium-bodied, minimally tannic construction invites drinking without waiting, and it will handily fill the bill as a lively, palate-pleasing companion to most any pasta dish requiring fruity brightness and snap.

GOOD VALUE \$ \$20.00

86 NOCETO Rosso Lot 2 Amador County

40% Sangiovese; 30% Barbera; 20% Zinfandel; 9% Aglianico; 1% other. Bearing the barely noticeable designation of "Lot 2" rather than a vintage date, Noceto's self-described Tuscan blend is all about slightly juicy, very straightforward, fruit and makes no claim to complexity now nor promises to do so in the years ahead. Its scant tannins lend a wee bit of tactile grip without suggesting that further age is in order, and the wine calls for drinking in the short term with simple foods ranging from burgers and grilled sausages to spaghetti and meatballs.



E389 PEJU The Farm Napa Valley 2015

63% Sangiovese; 37% Cabernet Sauvignon. There is no question but that this wine is very ripe, and it flirts with a tell-tale touch of heat as proof, but it is layered and loaded with very deep and delicious, black cherry and blackberry fruit and wholly avoids the dried-grape desiccation that routinely comes as the cost of such immodest ripeness. It is moderately full in body, and, while its Cabernet component is manifest in its firming tannins, it is not tough or abrasive as much as it is solid, sturdy and ageworthy. It will team successfully with hearty roasts in the short term, but it is sure to reward a few years of keeping.

rangiovese

85 PAZZO Napa County 2016

44% Sangiovese; 26% Syrah; 14% Cabernet Sauvignon; 8% Petite Sirah; 8% Merlot. Ripeness is the key note of this decidedly mixed and unconventional blend and imparts a diffuse sense of sweetness in place of any kind of defined fruit. The wine is full, it is fat and it is palpably hot at the finish, and, while sufficiently tannic as to take on a noticeable back-palate pucker, it tends to sluggishness throughout and does not impress as one to wait on for long.

86 ROCK WALL Super Alamedan California 2017

46% Sangiovese; 30% Montepulciano; 20% Cabernet Sauvigon; 4% Sangrantino. This clean, medium-bodied offering smacks of red cherries and a tart touch of cranberries but is, in the main, a fairly simple and straightfoward wine whose minimal tannins and affable, matter-of-fact fruitiness direct it to light-hearted drinking over the next couple of years with dishes ranging from spaghetti and meatballs to simple barbecued fare.

(387 SAGGI Columbia Valley 2015

62% Sangiovese; 28% Cabernet Sauvignon; 10% Syrah. By Long Shadows. First, this is a big, strapping wine that wanders well outside of classic Sangiovese lines, and, second, it is so very ripe that it treads dangerously close to being over the top, but, with those caveats noted, it is a potent, highly extracted, multi-varietal



blend that will not be accused of lacking for richness or depth. It is presently bound up in gruff tannins and winds up a bit hot and dry at the finish, yet, if elegance looks to lie out of its reach regardless of how it is held, it will be a far better wine if hidden away for four or five years.



(388 TRENTADUE Alexander Valley 2016

Leading with an attractive, nicely composed nose of cherries, dried plums and mildly spicy oak with lively, mid-density flavors to match, this vital, well-balanced youngster displays fine fruity continuity and keen Sangiovese focus from front to back. It is medium-full-bodied and finishes with a slight tannic bite that argues for another year or two of age, but those whose patience is tested by even a short wait, will find its closing astringency is forgivable when it is poured as a partner to simply grilled steaks in the immediate months ahead.

Tempranillo

First appearing in California near the beginning of the twentieth century under the name of Valdepeñas, Tempranillo failed to gain a significant foothold and was largely forgotten during the years of Prohibition. It was, in its infancy hereabouts, and remains to this day planted principally in hot Central Valley locations where it is anonymously used in bulk

wines, but spurred on by the growing international fame of Rioja and Ribera del Duero in its Spanish homeland, a few intrepid producers have chosen to try their hands at making somewhat more serious versions. West Coast Tempranillo is best viewed inconclusively as a work in progress rather than a significant newcomer and sure thing, and its ultimate success will depend on clonal selection and site, but its local defenders just might point out that the same was once said of Syrah. Time will tell.



E388 ARTESA Galatea 56% Sonoma County 2015

44% Napa County. 51% Tempranillo; 41% Cabernet Sauvignon; 5% Graciano; 3% Petit Verdot. Artesa's proprietary red blend leads with likeable, quietly complex aromas of vanilla and ripe berries underlain by subtle notes of minerals and stones which are echoed in kind by its nicely composed, medium-deep flavors. The wine is medium-full-bodied with buttressing tannins lending structure, but it keeps astringency well in check, and, it is, all in all, a well-made effort that is balanced for successful service with food now and one that looks to gain a little more polish with a few years of keeping.

85 BERRYESSA GAP Yolo County 2016

Brawn rather than beauty is the ongoing message of this ripe and weighty wine. It smacks briefly of candied black cherries but

85 BOEGER El Dorado 2016

If a little fuzzy and indistinct with regard to defined fruit but at least leading with an impression of ripeness on the nose, this medium-bodied bottling runs quickly to rising acidity that brings a little too much puckery astringency into play and loses its all-too-tentative fruity bearings before ending on a stiff and slightly angular note. \$20.00

85 CLAUTIERE Paso Robles 2013

5% Cabernet Sauvignon; 5% Malbec; 5% Petit Verdot. Pushy ripeness jumps out ahead of most everything else here, and fruit struggles with only limited success in the attempt to keep up. The wine ranks as the biggest, more substantial Tempranillo in this month's bunch, but it wants for keen varietal character, and its elevated alcohol – stated to be a whopping 16.3% – leaves a considerable finishing burn in its wake.

86 HARNEY LANE Lodi 2015

This big-bodied offering mixes its messages insofar that it is at

once ripe and rich but never quite comes clear with regard to defined fruit, and its suggestions of black and red berries compete with slightly chocolaty ripeness from the first. It toughens up in the latter going as so many of its brethren do, but it stops short of being so abrasively astringent as to rule out the chance for improvement with age.



Billing HEARST RANCH "Chileno" Paso Robles 2016

As a group, the current batch of Tempranillos tends to be a fairly gruff bunch, but this one from Hearst Ranch is cut from more mannerly cloth and is a supple, well-balanced working that keys on nicely ripened berries and plums with a gentle adjunct of soft spice and is not given to dryness or aggressive astringency. It can, in fact, be enjoyed early on with mixed grilled meats of all sorts, and its measured, finely fit tannins lends a polite bit of grip while ensuring three or four years of ageability.

85 KIRCHHOFF Home Ranch Red Clarksburg 2015

54% Tempranillo; 14% Cabernet Sauvignon; 13% Graciano; 11% Carignane; 8% Mourvèdre. This ripe and rustic, kitchensink blend of varieties is as vague in fruity specifics as might be expected, and, after tasting briefly of dark berries, it sputters and dries out as it goes with middling tannins standing exposed and alone at the finish. A few years of smoothing will be of benefit here, but the depth and interest that its overly ambitious price predicts are nowhere to be found.



KRUPP BROTHERS



(387 KRUPP BROTHERS The Doctor Stagecoach Vyd. 2014)

Napa Valley. 36% Tempranillo; 26% Cabernet Franc; 24% Cabernet Sauvignon; 10% Malbec; 4% Petit Verdot. We are normally big fans of wines from this producer and site, and, if this one delivers the goods in terms of extract and ripeness, it is at once both tight and noticeably hot with elevated tannins and pushy acidity conspiring to cut its flavors a bit short. Its slightly high-toned aromas of boysenberries, cranberries and plums sport a sweet, slightly spicy, cedar-like trim, but, on the palate, expected fruit retreats behind a veil of astringency that will require extended cellaring and a bit of luck to lift.

85 LAVA VINE Mangels Vineyards Suisun Valley 2015

5% Petite Sirah; 5% Merlot. Smelling of sweet, fully ripe plums and briefly tasting of the same, this uneven bottling is full and slightly fat in feel on entry but turns its attention to ripeness before drying tannins and late-arriving heat take control and outdistance its less-than-confident fruit. Hearty foods and/or a few years of age should help its case.

85 MARIMAR Don Miguel Vineyard 2015

Russian River Valley. Its aromatic mix of plums and tart berries may make for a promising start here, but, in the mouth, this hard-

edged wine is comparatively empty and not half as fruity, and its stark acidity accentuates its overzealous astringency. Age might see it smoothing, but time alone cannot provide the fruity heart that it so desperately needs.



(387 MORGAN Arroyo Seco 2016

Not nearly as given to tannic austerity as many and succeeding more than most in keeping a continuous bit of spiced, tobaccotinged, cherry-like fruit in its sights, the latest Morgan Tempranillo is an easy-to-like wine of moderately full body and, while slightly sturdy, is never overly tough. It can be enjoyed now with grilled meats of all kinds and offers modest potential for a few years of growth.

86 POMAR JUNCTION Reserve El Pomar District 2014

Comprised entirely of Tempranillo, this rough-cut youngster wants for little in the way of evident extract and mass, yet its inner fruit presently fights a losing battle with lots of phenolic toughness and fails to fully convince that it will emerge the winner with age. It is worth setting aside for another three or four years, but it seems set in its rustic ways and will always be one that requires drinking with decidedly heartier fare.

84 RAPTOR RIDGE Reserva Rogue Valley 2015

More than a few of the Tempranillos under review are burdened with more astringency than their fruit can comfortably support, but fruitiness of any kind goes largely missing here leaving this underfilled effort decidedly tough and sere with little prospect of better with additional age.



£389 YORBA Shake Ridge Vineyards Amador County 2011

6% Graciano. Each of the two Yorba offerings make a good case for allowing Tempranillo some time to age, and, while not wholly free of still-obvious tannins, both have developed a good bit of bottle bouquet and plenty of fruity vitality. This one can go further but is a fairly involving now and will make dandy drinking with the likes of a rare Porterhouse over the course of the next three to four years. \$38.00

\$\footnote{3}\otemathbb{89}\$ YORBA Shake Ridge Vineyards Amador County 2010

Here, again, is a Tempranillo that has aged remarkably well, and, like its year-younger mate, it earns high marks for its fruity volume and complexity. It is fairly full and carries more tannin than might be expected of an eight-year-old wine, but its admittedly sturdy style does not come at the price of dissuasive toughness, and its well-extracted, dark cherry and berry fruit effortlessly eases its way past its residual astringency. It is a wholly satisfying wine now, but it clearly can grow for a bit, and we see no reason to rush to drink it up. \$38.00



It has been argued that the Mystique of Rosé is that it has no mystique, and just maybe that helps to explain its remarkable populist appeal in recent years. While it may be true that pouring a glass of Rosé needs no ceremony, we would remind that there are more than a handful of pink bottlings, such as those from Chehalem, Lucy, Miro and Terra Valentine, to name but a few reviewed in this issue, that successfully strive to be more than simple, light-hearted, picnicky quaffs. The increasing number of new

efforts that make their ways to our tables is sign enough that its popularity has not waned, and what was once regarded as merely a warm-weather refresher has become a year-round staple for wine drinkers of all stripes.

86 ANGELINE Rosé of Pinot Noir California 2017

Clean and mildly candied but with a steady fix on strawberry-like fruit and a nicely balanced Rosé that sports a slight trim of sweetness, this affable, very straightforward effort speaks to Pinot Noir with a quiet, if fairly sure varietal voice. It is both easy to drink on its own and has the structure to successfully pair with food, and it is made all the more likeable by its modest price.

GOOD VALUE

85 CHARLES & CHARLES Rosé Columbia Valley 2017

67% Syrah; 14% Cab. Sauvignon; 9% Grenache; 7% Mourvedre; 2% Cinsault; 1% Counoise. Hitting all of the Rhône varietal bases with a bit of Cabernet tossed in for good measure, this slightly strawberryish pink is a light, low-keyed, dry-finished offering that, while making no claim to seriousness or fruity richness, is withal a likeable, cleanly made Rosé whose slight lack of reach is easily forgiven in a wine of its price.

GOOD VALUE



CHEHALEM

E3 88 CHEHALEM Three Vineyard Rosé of Pinot Noir 2017

Willamette Valley. More subtle than forceful yet a wine that does a good job at expressing well-defined fruit with a mildly floral, rose-like inflection to its nose and a good bit of buoyancy to its juicy, ever-so-slightly sweet varietally specific flavors, the Chehalem Rosé keys insistently on cherries and strawberries. It tips the scales toward red wine rather than white but is always light on its feet, and it gets a refreshing lift from acidity while showing the fruity substance to stand up to food.

GOOD VALUE

85 DEERFIELD Checkerbloom Syrah Rosé 2017

Sonoma Valley. Dark enough in appearance to be considered a lighter red wine and showing more concentration and palatal weight than a typical pink, this moderately full-bodied Rosé tilts slightly to sweetness, but it stays in balance and finishes with a lingering element of plummy fruit underscored by a light touch of firming tannin.

83 DUE VIGNE Rosato El Dorado County 2017

56% Cinsault; 22% Syrah; 22% Grenache. Simply put, this fairly dark, cherry-red offering is a wine at war with itself. It is sweet, sour and tannic all at the same time, and its initial pretense to fruit is effectively quashed by bitter astringency that ultimately takes precedence over anything else.

85 EDUCATED GUESS Rosé of Pinot Noir Napa Valley 2017

Although this dry, medium-full-bodied effort conveys the vinous weight of Rosé, it is never quite clear when it comes to focused fruit, and it tends to heaviness on the palate with a slightly bitter

back-end. Although not unduly tannic, it finishes with enough unbuffered astringency to dissuade simple quaffing and will be far better as a companion to food.

84 FONTAINE Dry Rosé Potter Valley 2017

By McFadden. Pale straw in color with but a light touch of pink and showing a mild, but persistent suggestion of matchsticks that is never countered by sufficient fruit, this dry, softly balanced bottling comes up wanting for the freshness expected in a Rosé of its age and draws up a bit short with a slight chemical bite punctuating its mildly chalky finish.

86 HEARST RANCH "Julia" Rosé Paso Robles 2017

30% Syrah; 18% Malbec; 15% Tempranillo; 15% Petit Verdot; 12% Grenache; 10% Petite Sirah. This mixed bag of varieties is arguably complex in that it smells and tastes variously of plums, strawberries and peaches with hints of rhubarb surfacing along the way. It is full, a touch sweet and sufficiently rounded to make for easy drinking on its own, but its juicier traits will hold it in fine stead as a companion to ham croquettes or brunch-time dishes such as a cheesy croque monsieur.

84 J. LOHR Gesture Grenache Rosé Paso Robles 2017

A fruity Rosé this is not. In place of the anticipated strawberries of Grenache, it steers to uncomfortably reedy herbaceousness from start to finish, and the scant smattering of dilute, indistinct fruit that it flirts with from time to time is never enough to get it on a likeable track.

85 KIRCHHOFF Clarksburg 2016

100% Grenache. Mildly minerally but low in evident fruit on the nose with flavors that are similarly sparing in fruity richness despite its ripeness and moderately full palatal presence, this wine drifts directly to a chalky, faintly aspirin-like finish that takes it out of the running when unaccompanied quaffing is the aim. Save it for food, but do not save it for long as it will do nothing but dry out with age.

85 KLINKER BRICK Bricks & Roses Lodi 2017

38% Grenache; 30% Carignane; 24% Syrah; 8% other. Clean, but fairly dry and nondescript on the nose with what is at best a sparing sense of sour plums that is reiterated in its slightly tart, citrus-tinged flavors, this simple, sparsely filled effort very much wants drinking with comparatively lighter fare lest its modest fruit is lost altogether

lucy

E390 LUCY Rosé of Pinot Noir Santa Lucia Highlands 2017

Rosés made from Pinot Noir abound, and they run from wispily delicate to over-extracted in style but few manage to find the sweet spot wherein fruity richness, careful balance and grace

are as well-combined as evidenced here. At once fresh and fruity yet with an uncommonly serious side, the Lucy Rosé shows a sense of polish and crafting that sets it apart, and, for all of its youthful charm and appeal, it is the rare Rosé that can benefit further from a year or two of additional age.



Madroña

(387 MADROÑA Grenache Rosé El Dorado 2017

2% Barbera; 2% Zinfandel; 2% Nebbiolo. Bearing the singularly strawberry-like stamp of Grenache in its very clean, lightly mineral-accented aromas and fundamentally staying in step, albeit a bit haltingly, in taste, Madroña's Rosé is a solid, fairly vinous, well-structured pink that ultimately wants a little more fruity drive and extension to better buffer the pushy, somewhat chalky astringency that takes hold in the latter going. It gets credit, however, for not abandoning the fruit that it has, and both service with food and a year in the bottle will appreciably improve its lot.

GOOD VALUE £ \$18.00



MIRO C E L L A R S

(388) MIRO Grenache Rosé Chevalier Vineyard 2017

Mendocino County. From its concentrated aromas of ripe plums and strawberries to its ample, fairly extracted flavors of the same, this is a Rosé that ups the ante when it comes to substance and size, and it is as well-structured as it is generously filled. It is, in fact, a wine that calls for a bit of bottle time in that it is still fairly firm and slightly coarse to finish, but its fruity persistence provides reason for real optimism. It is certain to show better now if poured with food rather than being sipped on its own, and we are more than willing to bet that it will improve with a bit of age.

GOOD VALUE \$\square\$ \square \square \square \qquare \qqqqq \qqqq \qqqqq \qqqqq \qqqqq \qqqqq \qqqqq \qqqqq \qqqqq \qqqqq \qqqq \qqqqq \qqqq \qqqqq \qqqqq \qqqqq \qqqqq \qqqqq \qqqqq \qqqqq \qqqqq \qqqq \qqqqq \qqqq \qqqqq \qqqq \qqq \qqqq \qqq \qqqq \qqq \qqqq \q

Lightly perfumed with flowers and sweet cherries in its delicate and very inviting nose, this firmly balanced Rosé is a bit tighter and less outgoing than expected once in the mouth. It is well-focused on Pinot and stays that way to the end, but it is more structured than outwardly juicy in taste and not one for drinking without the smoothing effects of food unless obvious acidity is to one's taste. It will find a comfortable place alongside sundry chicken dishes in the immediate term, and it joins the fairly small cohort of Rosés that will not only keep well but could grow for a couple of years.

86% Grenache; 14% Counoise. Right in step with its hard-not-to like predecessors, this year's Uncle Roget's Rosé is above all else a fun and very friendly wine that is long on juicy, up-front appeal. It is so unabashedly fruity that it teases with sweetness, but it is not in the least candied and is nicely balanced throughout. It is tasty right now and will handily keep for a year or two, but we would opt for drinking it up before the 2018 version appears.

GOOD VALUE

86 RUCKSACK Barbera Rosé Sierra Foothills 2017

If not forcefully fruity, this briskly balanced bottling is marked by the fairly constant presence of berries and not-quite-ripe plums with a touch of sweetness adding to its appealing impression of juiciness. It is not disagreeably tannic, but it finishes with a fair bit of vinous grip, and it has the substance and fruity weight to successfully pair with grilled sausages and lighter meats such as pork and veal.

E3 87 SANFORD Rosé of Pinot Noir Sta. Rita Hills 2017
Full and fruity on the nose and very much following suit on the palate, this ample Rosé takes a place on the fuller end of the Rosé spectrum. It could, in many ways and most notably in its slightly grippy astringency, pass for a lighter red wine, and, while not our first choice for poolside sipping in warmer months, it will, for the next year or two, turn the trick as a foil to savory

\$\ \frac{3}{87}\$ SPICY VINES Rosé of Syrah Sierra Foothills 2017

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pork entrees of all kinds.

Its medium-dark, cherry pink hue suggests that this one might well be a Rosé that aims for a little more richness, and, in fact, the wine proves to be fairly generous in ripe cherry fruit with a rounded, mouthfilling tactile presence. It is a tad soft in balance, but that makes it very easy to drink now both with and without food, and its near-subliminal touch of sweetness only lends to its appealing juiciness.

SPICY VINES Violet Rosé Dry Creek Valley 2017

Comprised of a mixed blend of Counoise, Grenache, Zinfandel and Cabernet Sauvignon and showing subtle overtones of dried herbs and flowers to its direct blackberry and plum fruit, this wine mirrors its Sierra Foothills cellarmate's inclination to plumpness, and, if similarly a touch soft, is slightly drier in tone. It is fairly full with a pleasant bit of latter-palate grip, and it will prove a versatile mate to a wide range of foods from spicy jerked chicken to well-seasoned pork stews.



(389 TERRA VALENTINE Rosé of Petite Sirah 2017

Spring Mountain District. Of all the grapes from which Rosé might be made, Petite Sirah is not the first that comes to mind, but this well-made pink exhibits none of the toughness that its variety might suggest and is a surprisingly deep and fruity wine. It is fairly dark in color and nicely structured with a bit of redwine richness and grip, and, if a little too much wine for lighthearted solo sipping, it will make tasty drinking with everything from lightly spicy, mid-eastern lamb dishes and pulled pork to the noble hamburger.

\$\frac{3}{3}\] TRENTADUE Rosato di Sangiovese 2017

Alexander Valley. A word of warning needs be made here in that this is not a bone-dry Rosé but one with a fair measure of evident sweetness, yet a bit of sugar should not be seen as a liability when it is matched by plentiful, well-defined fruit and the wine is as well-balanced as this one is. It calls to mind ripe berries and watermelon with a note of tart plums just off to the side, and, though easy to drink own its own, finding just the right mealtime niche here will be a bit trickier. Sweet-leaning barbecue fare may be just the right thing.

Best Buys in the Market

REISLING



For whatever reason, and there are many from marketing to misconception, Riesling still has not developed the kind of following so many think it deserves. One of the upsides for consumers, however, is that its lack of wider fame means that terrific values abound, and the most expensive of this month's recommended examples are modestly priced at but twenty-two dollars. Heading up October's roster of not-to-be-missed examples, the POET'S LEAP Columbia Valley 2017 (\$22.00) and the CC CHATEAU STE. MICHELLE Eroica Columbia Valley 2016 (\$20.00) assume their accustomed places at the head of the class and are Rieslings that will age famously for years, while newcomer, Ryan Stirm, checks in with a wonderfully vibrant, dry-finished working, the CC STIRM Kick-On Vineyard Santa Barbara County 2016 (\$22.00). If better known for its Pinot Noirs, Oregon's Willamette Valley counts a lovely pair of recent CGCW favorites, and both the moderately sweet © 90-point YAMHILL VALLEY

VINEYARDS 2015 (\$18.00) and its younger, off-dry cellarmate, the \$\epsilon\$ 89-point YAMHILL VALLEY VINEYARDS 2016 (\$18.00) are beautifully balanced offerings that earn best Best Buy endorsement. As always, Washington State once again makes a very strong showing with a number of lovely Rieslings running from very dry to fairly sweet, and of the former, the lightly floral \$\epsilon\$ CHATEAU STE. MICHELLE Dry Columbia Valley 2017 (\$9.00) is nothing short of an out-and-out bargain. Among those that flirt with a balanced bit of sweetness, the \$\epsilon\$ 90-point CHATEAU STE. MICHELLE Cold Creek Vineyard Columbia Valley 2016 (\$22.00), the juicy and outgoing \$\epsilon\$ PACIFIC RIM J Columbia Valley 2017 (\$11.00) and the lively \$\epsilon\$ CHARLES SMITH Kung Fu Girl Washington 2016 (\$13.00) are enthusiastically recommended, and those looking for something a bit sweeter still are bound to be pleased by both the \$\epsilon\$ HOGUE Columbia Valley 2016 (\$10.00) and the \$\epsilon\$ PACIFIC RIM Sweet Columbia Valley 2017 (\$11.00). Finally, as a second reminder that enjoyable Riesling can be found a bit closer to home as well, the medium-sweet \$\epsilon\$ FETZER Goosefoot Road Monterey County 2016 (\$10.00) is hard to beat for unceremonious gulping.

CHENIN BLANC



PINOT NOIR



Pinot Noir will get top billing in next month's issue, but there are a number of recent favorites that should not be overlooked. The & 90-point ANCIEN Carneros 2015 (\$38.00) is a precise, incisively fruity, well-balanced working that can age for a bit but is drinking especially well at the moment, and it is joined by the similarly successful & 90-point DRNK Cavers Cuvée Russian River Valley 2016 (\$38.00), an exceptionally well-crafted Pinot that is likewise a wine that offers plenty of pleasure now but will continue to improve over the next several years. Although not aiming quite as high, but two satisfying, well-defined examples that handily outperform any of their comparably priced cousins, the 86-point CHIME California 2016 (\$12.00) and the previously recommended & BOGLE California 2015 (\$12.00) should bring smiles of surprise to those who think that tasty Pinot Noir is necessarily too expensive to be more than an occasional treat.

Connoisseurs' Series



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:

DRAGONETTE

& STOLPMAN Syrah Estate Grown Ballard Canyon 2016, & STOLPMAN Syrah Originals Ballard Canyon 2015, and & DRAGONETTE Syrah Seven Santa Ynez Valley 2015.

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