



Old vines at the Monte Bello vineyard at Ridge Vineyards in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

CALIFORNIA TO RIVAL THE WORLD

Many of the world's top-rated red wines hail from California. They are rare and expensive – surrounded as much by prestige as by prejudice. Falstaff goes in search of what gives these wines their unique identity and where they are heading.

WORDS ANNE KREBIEHL MW WITH ADDITIONAL TASTING NOTES BY PETER MOSER

Photo: Robert Holmes

Californian red wine, especially from Napa Valley, has a certain image. The wines are thought of as big, bold, sometimes even brash – and sinfully expensive. But while they undoubtedly speak of Californian sunshine, they come with more nuance than they are given credit for. They are joined by equally expressive reds from Sonoma and the Central Coast. The winemakers and estates may not look back at centuries of tradition, but they are at the cutting edge of winemaking. Because their wines are valued in the market, they can afford to lavish care on vineyards, invest in progress and attract talent. They are also dealing with a changing climate and are re-assessing what it means to make wine in California – in all their numerous styles and philosophies. We are here to trace what makes these



THERE IS THE CRUCIAL INFLUENCE OF THE COLD PACIFIC AND ITS CLIMATIC INTERPLAY WITH THE INLAND HEAT.

wines so unmistakably Californian – because authenticity and sense of place are the cornerstones of fine wine. We find much to discover and rediscover in the Golden State.

THE PLACE AND ITS PAST

California's coastline spans 1,350km/840 miles – longer than Italy's boot. Its wine country covers just over eight degrees of latitude from its southernmost point in San Diego to its northernmost outpost on Lake Trinity. Then there is the crucial influence of the cold Pacific Ocean and its climatic interplay with the inland heat. In the numerous valleys along the coast and inland where both these elements are moderated by topography, read mountain ranges and their varying altitudes, vines thrive. That this land was destined for viticulture was as evident to Spanish

Inset above: The Robert Mondavi Winery in Napa Valley. Below: The Pacific Ocean and California's mountainous, coastal terrain are key elements in the different styles of wine that are made.



The harvest crew at Ridge Vineyards picks grapes into small crates, so they won't be crushed by their own weight and will arrive in the winery in pristine condition.

missionaries in the 18th century as to the scores of European immigrants who arrived in the 19th century. By the turn of the 20th century, there was a thriving and professional Californian wine industry: in the late 1850s there were 2,407ha/5,948 acres of vines in California, by 1914, that had swelled to 121,114ha/299,280 acres. Then came Prohibition. Ratified in 1919, the Volstead Act came into force in 1920 and was not repealed until 1933. After this disruptive blow, new pioneers emerged who set the course. André Tchelistcheff in the 1940s and 50s, Robert Mondavi and Paul Draper in the 1960s, Warren Winiarski, Jess Jackson and many more in the 1970s and 80s.

PARIS, PARKER & CULT WINES

A turning point came in 1976, when the late British merchant Steven Spurrier staged a comparative blind tasting in his Paris wine shop, pitting the best French wines against a range of then unknown Californian wines. To their horror, famous French critics scored the Californian wines higher

than their homegrown classics. The story was covered by *Time* magazine and all of a sudden California was no longer an *arriviste* – it had arrived. At the time, California was still planted to a wide mix of grape varieties – suited to the land or not. But the 'Judgement of Paris', as it became known, along with another key



Steven Spurrier's 'Judgement of Paris' in 1976, changed the course of Californian wine.

figure, changed the California wine industry: an American critic called Robert Parker. His rise in the 1980s coincided with California's – and his love for ripe, opulent wines soon made itself felt. A third element was also decisive: many vineyards had been planted on rootstocks that were not resistant to the phylloxera pest, thus when vineyards had to be replanted in the 1980s, more often than not they were planted to Cabernet Sauvignon. In the 1990s, the phenomenon of the cult wine was born: fine wines, usually Cabernet Sauvignon-based, made in tiny quantities and initially released at expensive but still affordable prices, received top scores and sold out immediately. You were either one of the lucky early subscribers or had to languish on a waiting list for years. Prices went into the stratosphere, many jumped on the bandwagon and California gained its reputation.

CALIFORNIA TODAY

Today, the long shadow cast by the 1980s, 90s and 2000s is waning and California, >



Photos: To Kalon, Ridge Vineyards, Napa Vintners/Bella Spurrier Getty Images/Adam Kaz



CALIFORNIA, IN TUNE WITH GLOBAL VITICULTURE, HAS TURNED ITS ATTENTION BACK TO ITS SOILS, ITS LAND, ITS TERRITORY.



Above left: Cabernet Sauvignon grapes turning from green to purple, a process known as *veraison*. Inset left: Cathy Corison's winery and her Kronos Vineyard in Rutherford.

> in tune with global viticulture, has turned its attention back to its soils, its land, its territory. The top winemakers strive to express place – that amalgam of site, climate, aspect, soil and culture – and the wines reflect their origin.

Some winemakers, in fact, have never done anything else. “There have been many turning points in Napa Valley’s history and in ours. I think one of the biggest ones, in terms of wine quality, was when the focus shifted from the cellar to the vineyard. Here at Shafer that started happening in the late 1980s and has continued to evolve every year,” says Doug Shafer of Shafer Vineyards. “We farm over 200 acres and we’re out there just about nonstop from January through November – someone comes in contact with each vine at least 11 or 12 times. The number of times human hands come in contact with Shafer vines each year is more than 2.7 million.” He notes how it took a while to recognise what would work best: “The grape that really shines on our site is Cabernet Sauvignon and that’s the result of a lot of trial and error. Early in our history this property has been planted to Zinfandel, Merlot, Chenin Blanc, Sangiovese, and Chardonnay. The clear winner is Cabernet Sauvignon.”



Cathy Corison owns the Kronos vineyard with 51-year-old vines. The wine is a Napa icon.

VALLEY AND MOUNTAIN

Cathy Corison is another winemaker whose focus never swayed from her vines. She founded her estate in 1987 in Napa’s Rutherford AVA (American Viticultural Area) after working as a winemaker across the Valley. She explains why Rutherford, on an alluvial fan that straddles several AVAs, is special: “Extremely well-drained gravelly loam soils hold water for the vines when they need to grow in the spring. Thanks to rainless summers, they dry out right at

veraison, when the grapes change colour, so the vines get busy ripening their fruit.” It is on this land that her real treasure stands: “Kronos Vineyard is situated on the bench with soils so gravelly that we could mine them for gravel,” she says. “The hottest part of the valley, St. Helena, has the perfect climate for Cabernet with the heat to consistently and optimally ripen the fruit, retain acidity and lignify seeds.

“Kronos is also one of the last old Cabernet vineyards in the Napa Valley, planted in 1971. Growing on St. George rootstock it avoided the fate of most other vineyards that were on AxR1 rootstock when phylloxera came back. Yields are pitifully low, but it has been a gift to work with these gnarly old ladies. The scraggly clusters of tiny berries result in wines of remarkable concentration. Kronos has been farmed organically for over 25 years, long before it became fashionable, so its soils are wildly alive.”

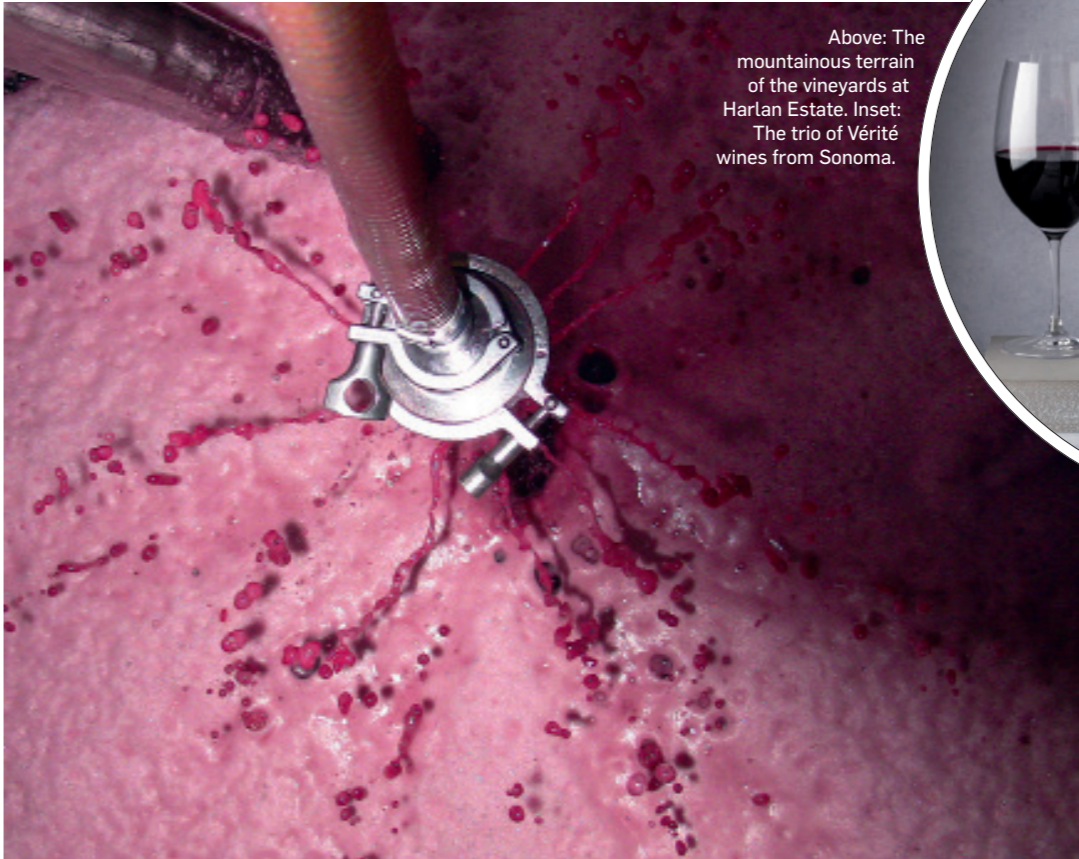
Another historic vineyard on the Valley floor is To Kalon, first planted in 1868, its Greek name meaning “highest beauty.” The late Robert Mondavi (1913–2008), one of the key figures in forging quality

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Photos: Ridge Vineyards; Corison Winery; Robert McGlenahan; Harlan Estate; Verité



Above: The mountainous terrain of the vineyards at Harlan Estate. Inset: The trio of Verité wines from Sonoma.



Left: Pumping over fermenting Cabernet Sauvignon. This process helps to extract colour and tannins.

> viticulture in Napa Valley, had made wine from parcels of To Kalon from the 1960s onwards. Owned by Constellation Brands today, the Mondavi brand is still going strong. Geneviève Janssens, chief winemaker at Robert Mondavi Winery, trained with the man himself and says: “Robert Mondavi knew that he had a treasure in To Kalon. It offers three important things: personality, resilience and a source of inspiration. Its beauty is also its resilience: whatever the vintage conditions, we always end up with great wine.”

“It was this passion and Mondavi’s pursuit of perfection at his winery that inspired so many to follow in his footsteps.” One of those he inspired was Will Harlan. He founded his eponymous estate in 1984 in the hills above Oakville. While Kronos and To Kalon speak of the Valley floor, others make different styles on the mountains that rise on either side of the

Valley. Harlan is one of them. He deliberately went for hillside vineyards. Harlan’s Proprietary Red became one of Napa’s most sought-after wines, grown at 100 - 167m/325 - 550ft, renowned for its structure and longevity. Before buying the land for the original Harlan Estate, Harlan had eyed another property which finally came up for sale in 2008. This is the family’s Promontory Estate, and again, the wine is different from Harlan – because it is grown in very different conditions – despite being just 500m/550yds apart. Surrounded on all sides by woodland, winemaker David Cilli describes the land as “wild, very steep, rugged, untamed.” It lies along a geological faultline between two ridges on metamorphic rock. Motion sensor cameras

have captured mountain lions and bears on the land. The wine is distinct from Harlan: where Harlan is velvet, Promontory is silk. Cilli says the surrounding forests “harvest the fog and moisture of the mornings and release it later in the day,” lending freshness to the wines. “Freshness is the opposite of gravity in the mouth, it gives you that tonic feel.” Today, freshness is as prized as power and even those who know Napa will find something new to discover – with a different style. “We feel there is a step change in Napa, too,” Cilli says.

When Ann Colgin founded her estate in 1992, she also looked for mountain vineyards. Paul Roberts MS, president of Colgin Cellars, explains that the three



Inset: A perfect bunch of grapes. Below: Vines in the To Kalon vineyard on the Valley floor with the Mayacamas Mountains in the background.



The fermentation room at Harlan Estate, offering the possibility of fermentation in oak and stainless steel.

THE IX ESTATE VINEYARD IS A LAVA FLOW WITH IRON-TINGED RED CLAY. MIXED WITH THE ROCKY BASE MATERIAL, IT ADDS A SANGUINE NATURE TO THE SITE.

single vineyard sites they farm are very different, resulting in distinct styles of wine: the historic Tychson Hill vineyard at 91 - 129m/300 - 400ft is on a rare volcanic formation, sitting between Spring Mountain and Diamond Mountain. It is their hottest site during the day and the coldest at night, creating exquisitely elegant wine. The Cariad vineyard on Spring Mountain at 122 - 152m/400 - 500ft is on an ancient riverbed uplifted by geological movement and benefits from the cold air flows of Spring Mountain; the IX Estate vineyard, the highest site at 335 - 427m/1,100 - 1,400ft is also of volcanic origin, “a lava flow with iron-tinged red clay. Mixed with the rocky base material it adds a sanguine nature to the site,” Roberts says. Likewise, the four wines of Lokoya from Spring Mountain, Diamond Mountain, Howell Mountain and Mount Veeder are distinct and straight 100 percent Cabernet Sauvignon expressions of these sites, fermented with native yeast and bottled unfiltered to underscore these differences.

THE ONLY WAY IS UP

But plush red wine is not just the preserve of Napa Valley. To its northwest, across the Mayacamas Mountains, in Sonoma

County, there are less well-known but similarly compelling AVAs – at higher elevations. Vineyards in Alexander Valley, Bennett Valley and Knight Valley start at elevations of 150m/500ft and rise much higher. Altitude makes a difference because the fog layer that comes in from the Pacific burns off earlier, allowing more sunlight, while cooler temperatures mean a longer growing season. When the late Jess Jackson (1930-2011), the man behind the famous Kendall-Jackson brand, wanted to create a red wine to rival the world, he lured French winemaker Pierre Seillan to California and gave him the pick of his Sonoma vineyards. Seillan chose sites in these high-elevation AVAs. This is how *Vérité* was born in 1998. Three wines are made: Merlot-based *La Muse*, Cabernet Franc-based *Le Désir* and Cabernet Sauvignon-based *La Joie*. Seillan’s blends are created from what he calls “micro-crus” and he says: “My only goal for *Vérité* wines was – and still is – to capture the best message of the soils from my different micro-crus to elevate the Sonoma appellation to the highest level in the world, with the unique style and signature of *Vérité*.” His wines are yet another facet of California – different, elegant, distinct.

Photos: Jamey Thomas, Timm Eubanks, Harlan Estate, Bob McGlenahan



Corny perhaps but also iconic – the famous sign greeting travellers as they enter Napa Valley.

> DOWN THE COAST

The trail of fine red wine continues right down the coast. Just south of San Francisco, the Santa Cruz Mountains AVA is home to another Californian Cabernet icon: Ridge Vineyards’ Monte Bello. The Monte Bello Vineyard was first planted in 1862. In 1949 it was replanted to Cabernet Sauvignon and in 1962 the first Ridge Monte Bello wine was released. In 1969 the philosophy graduate Paul Draper joined as winemaker and took the estate to ever greater heights. Harvest at this elevated vineyard at 600m/2,000ft is not until October. This is one of California’s inherent contradictions: further south is not necessarily warmer as the Pacific and altitude always have a role to play. John Olney is now the head winemaker. He says: “The combination of a coastal, cool climate and limestone-rich soils is rarely seen in California. This allows the grapes to attain full ripeness without excessive sugar, retaining firm, natural acidity. Since Monte Bello is all mountain-grown fruit, soil fertility is modest, resulting in lower yields and incredible concentration. Tasting the wine is almost like tasting the mountain itself.”

With its high proportion of American oak in winemaking, expressed in rich tones of coconut and vanilla which suits the ripe but defined fruit, Monte Bello is unmistakably and unapologetically Californian.



Above: Inland heat draws cold air and fog from the ocean into the valleys. Inset left: A limestone seam in the soils of the Adelaida District in Paso Robles.

WHAT I TASTE IN PASO ROBLES IS PURITY OF FRUIT FROM 320 DAYS OF SUN AND VIBRANCY OF ACIDS PRESERVED BY OUR ALTITUDE.



Fresh green on the vines and the iconic Valley Oaks of Sonoma County.



Three hours further south, Paso Robles, is another hot spot for full-bodied reds. Again, there are distinguishing features that make the area suited for world-class wines. Tablas Creek is a French-American co-production. The late Robert Haas (1927-2018) was an importer of French wines and partnered with the Perrin family of Château Beaucastel in the Rhône Valley, France, to create Tablas Creek. They hit on the Adelaida District of Paso Robles because of the area’s calcareous soils – and the altitudes of 427 - 487m/1,400 - 1,600ft. Robert’s son Jason now runs the winery. “What I taste in Paso Robles is purity of fruit from 320 days of sun, vibrancy of the acids preserved by our altitude and our cold nights,” he says, “and a salty, sea-spray minerality from the chalky soils here.” Haas’ top wine, *Esprit de Tablas*, is a blend of Mourvèdre, Grenache, Syrah and Counoise – different from the plush Cabernets, but definitely top range – with a spicy allure.

Daniel Daou of Daou Vineyards is just down the road but has specialised in Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay. He also emphasises the calcareous soils of the area: “They provide minerality and freshness that allow for dry-farming or deficit irrigation and wines made naturally without acidification.” He also points to the altitude of 670m/2,200ft and the proximity of the Pacific which is just 22km/14 miles away. “This allows us to have a climate warmer than Bordeaux and cooler than

Photos: Getty Images/Peter Unger; Daou Vineyards, mauritius images / Don White / Alamy / Alamy Stock Photos, Shutterstock, ADREES LATIF / REUTERS / picturedesk.com



St. Helena in Napa.” His wines have a different kind of texture and real brightness. He observes that the elegant and cooler style of his wines resonates with drinkers – despite the supposed “heresy” of planting Cabernet Sauvignon in Paso Robles.

FEELING THE HEAT

The challenges of climate change are real – as are the attendant extreme weather events and wildfires. While the cold Pacific acts as an air-conditioning unit for coastal vineyards, inland areas are feeling the heat. Ridge Vineyards’ John Olney says: “Especially in the era of climate change, starting with grapes that are in equilibrium is a big advantage.” Across California, there are a range of sustainability programmes, like Napa Green. The uptake is big – by 2019, 99 percent of Sonoma County vineyards and 94 percent of Napa vineyards were certified sustainable. Across the state, 55 percent of vineyard acreage is certified sustainable – so water preservation and soil protection is an ever-present endeavour. But climate change also makes itself felt in other ways. Colgin’s Paul Roberts says much more attention is now paid to water use and thus, the proportion of Merlot in the Colgin blends has steadily decreased over the years. “Merlot loves water like a kid loves candy,” he says about the vines’ thirst. He also underlines how aware everyone is of preserving freshness: “We talk about breeze and airflow, but for different reasons than in European viticulture. For us, it is to add freshness, preserve perfume and heighten acidity by cooling a vineyard down.” He notes that statewide, including areas that do not produce any wine at all, 2021 was the hottest year on record; he also adds that in the past decade, there has always been “some form of drought.” While some estates question whether Cabernet Sauvignon will still be the right answer for



California has had to grapple with extreme events like wildfires in recent years.

CALIFORNIA

A PERSPECTIVE

Katie Lazar and Christopher Howell, both 70 years old, have lived at Cain Vineyard & Winery on Spring Mountain in Napa Valley for years and Howell has made wine for the past 30 vintages there. In September 2020, they narrowly escaped the Glass Fire that raged through Napa County for days. They lost their home and some vineyards to the fire. After so many years, and this great loss, Howell has some perspective on the evolution of Napa Valley – and thus California. He is wondering what to replant.

“Places like the Napa Valley might be likened to the growing up of a person. At first, as a young child, we are full of potential, and certain proclivities might declare themselves, but it is really too soon to know what is possible. This might have been the case of Napa Valley in the 1870s and 1880s and again in the 1940s to 1960s. In these periods, the range of grape varieties planted and the wines made covered virtually the entire gamut of known wines.

Then, as an adolescent, we begin to try on various identities, but it is too soon to be even aware that what we are doing is trying to find ourselves. This might be where we were in the Napa Valley during the 1970s, 80s and early 90s, as we incessantly tried to compare our wines with the great wines of the world. At that time, our focus had narrowed to fewer varieties – especially Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon. But, as with all adolescents, this still didn’t mean that we knew what we were doing.

As a young adult, the Napa Valley is still struggling. We are just beginning to emerge from the fog of Cabernet and new oak barrels, but there is cause to hope that we are beginning to understand our *terroir* and our identity as a red winegrowing region.”

California in the coming decades, Roberts takes a long-term view, informed by historic perspective: “Over the next 30 years, in a generation, will we have to plant Touriga Nacional [a heat and drought-resistant grape from Portugal]? Maybe. As our climate continues to evolve, we will continue to make that evolution, too. In agriculture you cannot be revolutionary.” Style is changing, too: “We are able to make natural wines that retain elegance and freshness and don’t sacrifice power for elegance, the consumer adoption has started to shift in the US and in California,” says Daniel Daou.

In the meantime, Californian winemakers must also ensure they can compete with marijuana growers for farm labour now that recreational use of the plant has been legalised. Another challenge is attracting new drinkers – appealing to a younger demographic is hard with the current price tags. Nonetheless, the fact that Californian reds, especially blue-chip Cabernets, are seen as a worthwhile investment was proved again in February 2022 with the \$250 million sale of Shafer Vineyards to a Korean investor. Doug Shafer knows that wine is essentially about agriculture and all its inherent challenges: “Anyone who wants an easy, predictable life should definitely avoid farming,” he says. Winemakers the world over will agree – and also on the fact that Californian wines can rival the world.

BEST OF CALIFORNIA

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**2018 SCREAMING EAGLE
Napa Valley**

Intense dark berry aroma streams from the glass. Cabernet concentrate of cassis, liquorice, lavender oil, ethereal and floral at the same time, supported by fine oak, fresh red fruits and salty minerality. Full-bodied, but not exuberant, powerful yet elegant, carried by ripe tannins and driven by a racy acid core, a hedonistic wine of enormous length and incalculable potential. PM

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**2018 DALLA VALLE MAYA
Oakville, Napa Valley**

Deep, dark ruby, opaque core, purple reflections. Intense dark berry fruit, fresh cassis note, some nougat, fine wood spice, backed by vanilla. Complex, juicy, ripe sweet blackberries, elegant tannins, very long, chocolate touch on the finish, perfectly balanced, lingers for minutes, certain ageing potential for decades. PM

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**2015 HARLAN PROPRIETARY RED
Napa Valley**

Lush sumptuousness of plum and dark berry, comes with a floral touch and a sense of earthiness. The palate is lush and ripe with fruit while tannins coat the entire mouth, trailing hints of dark chocolate, ash and coal. This is powerful but utterly disciplined, of flexed and defined muscle, with incredible depth of tar, of berry, of beautifully bitter, dark chocolate, underlined by freshness. AK

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**2016 PROMONTORY
Napa Valley**

A hint of lichen, of moss and conifer clings to the dark fruit, almost with a citrus intensity. That perfume also informs the palate which seems compact, bullet-like, contained, seamless. There is luscious, melting, ripe fruit with a crushed blackberry character. The tannins are fine, freshness pervades the wine. This is firm, ripe, taut, fresh, dense, sleek, aromatic. There is focus and elegance. AK

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**2018 LOKOYA HOWELL MOUNTAIN,
Napa Valley**

Touches of mocha and vanilla play around the crushed blueberry notions of the nose. The palate has earthy depth and an uncommon kind of salty resonance. Stone, salt and earth have a beautiful presence and lend the wine an unusual harmony that pulls together powerful but sumptuous tannins, a bold but sinuous body and rich, layered fruit with a cinnamon and nutmeg finish. AK

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**2018 JOSEPH PHELPS INSIGNIA
Napa Valley**

Dark ruby, purple reflections. Fine, somewhat restrained wild berry confit, delicate raspberry and cherry aromas, fresh orange zest, attractive bouquet, a hint of cassis in the background. Complex, full-bodied, highly elegant, sweet cherry fruit, integrated tannins, fine nougat and great length, mineral in the finish, certain ageing potential for decades. PM

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**2017 CORISON KRONOS CABERNET SAUVIGNON
St. Helena, Napa Valley**

Wonderful blackcurrant lift to the perfumed nose, followed by fruit, wax and stone with some myrrh in the background. The palate is seamless, dense, flowing yet firm, like finest canvas stretched over a taut frame. There is an inherently graceful yet sumptuous structure, something very fine, bright and fresh at that dark-fruited heart of the wine. Incredibly elegant. AK

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**2017 SHAFER HILLSIDE SELECT
Stags Leap District, Napa Valley**

Crushed plum and mocha have a hint of mint on the nose and immediately point to intense concentration. The palate then is a sumptuous swish of utterly concentrated but aromatic fruit, edged with freshness and revealing layers of smoke, blackberry, cocoa and mocha. Ripe tannins are firm but smooth and underlined by fine, mouth-watering acidity. A picture of sleek, smooth, bundled power. AK

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**2018 COLGIN TYCHSON HILL
Napa Valley**

Notions of freshly crushed blackberry fruit and a bright, berryish scentedness. The palate is dense and unfurls like a bale of glossy, soft silk. The tannins are firmly woven but exquisitely fine and ripe, drying only towards the end. The fruit is rich, sumptuous but also fresh and fine. Notions of blueberry appear. Just a little heat sits on the long finish that also holds an echo of fine cocoa. AK

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● Up to EUR / GBP 15 and USD 20 ●● EUR / GBP 15–30 and USD 20–35 ●●● EUR / GBP 31–50 and USD 36–60
●●●● EUR / GBP 51–100 and USD 61–110 ●●●●● above EUR / GBP 100 and USD 110

BEST OF CALIFORNIA



97

2018 VÉRITÉ LE DÉSIR
Sonoma County

A shy nose hints at dark berry and some graphite only. It is on the palate that the fine freshness, the superfine tannin, like combed, starched silk, breaks through. There is crunch, there is freshness, there is this insistent, lasting, long and pure, tart red berry fruit. This is Cab Franc the California way. AK

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97

2016 CAIN FIVE
Spring Mountain District, Napa Valley

Crushed fruit of the forest plays on the nose alongside graphite and charcoal. On the palate juicy, well-defined plum joins in, tannins are superfine, lending a gracefully firm structure. There are glimpses of earth and chocolate and more of that glorious plum fruit. AK

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97

2018 DAQU SOUL OF A LION
Adelaida District, Paso Robles

A pure scent of cassis is joined by graphite and sea breeze on the nose. The palate brings an immediate sense of freshness and structure, of toned richness and density. The tannins are firm but seem to crumble into velvet. There is fine freshness and infinitely more of that lovely, scented, pure blackcurrant fruit. The finish is mouth-watering and has a hint of cocoa. AK

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2017 TESSERON ESTATE PYM-RAE, Napa Valley

From the Californian sister estate of Château Pontet-Canet. Deep ruby, purple reflections. Black berry fruit underlaid with sweet exotic spices, hints of clove, cinnamon and vanilla, ripe black cherries, hints of cedar. Taut, elegant texture, notes of cassis, ripe blueberries, strong tannins, chocolaty nuances on the finish, has a long lasting finish, very good prospects. PM

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97

2018 CARDINALE
Napa Valley

The nose is of lifted blackberry and dark forest fruit on this blend, made from a combination of Napa's mountain fruit. There are overtones of gravel, of stone, of hints of smoke. The palate is immediately concentrated, powerful and intense. This is like a primal force, bold but toned, rich but fresh. Ripe tannins coat the mouth, assert themselves while that dark fruit lingers. AK

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96

2018 RIDGE MONTE BELLO
Santa Cruz Mountains

The sumptuous vanilla tones of American oak frame the tart blackberry notes on the nose beautifully. The palate comes in with exquisite freshness and more of that alluring, ripe but tart blackberry fruit and baking spice. There is verve and brightness here, and a lovely sinuousness that shows off the elegant, firm tannins and the aromatic nuance of the fruit. Such a classic. AK

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95

2017 MONDAVI TO KALON RESERVE, Oakville, Napa Valley

Smoke and a touch of caramel play on the nose before dark plum fruit becomes apparent. The palate is fresh, has flow, and unfolds into a smooth blanket of dark fruit with overtones of tar, mocha, smoke and salted caramel. The tannins are dense and ripe and the finish has lovely, mouth-watering freshness. AK

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2017 TABLAS CREEK ESPRIT DE TABLAS
Adelaida District, Paso Robles

Smoke and spice immediately frame crushed red berry on the nose. The palate seems to carry darker, more brooding fruit at its core. Layers of fruit reveal themselves with aromatic nuance while gentle tannins lend texture. There is chalkiness and vivid freshness that balances the sunshine that seems visceral in the glass. The spice on the finish is utterly appetising. AK

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94

2019 L'AVENTURE ESTATE CUVÉE, Paso Robles

Deep ruby, purple reflections, discreetly brightened at the rim. Delicate animal spice, black berries, a hint of liquorice and black olives, tobacco nuances, candied orange zest in the background. Complex, sweet dark fruit of blackberries and plums, firm, somewhat demanding tannin, nougat on the finish, good length, will benefit from bottle age. PM

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● Up to EUR / GBP 15 and USD 20 ●● EUR / GBP 15–30 and USD 20–35 ●●● EUR / GBP 31–50 and USD 36–60
●●●● EUR / GBP 51–100 and USD 61–110 ●●●●● above EUR / GBP 100 and USD 110