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BLOCKBUSTER CABERNETS FROM NAPA

ANNUAL TASTING REPORT

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The BEAUTY OF CABERNET

The 2018 vintage in Napa sets a new bar BY JAMES MOLESWORTH



{ Photograph by AUBRIE PICK }

Cabernet Sauvignon from Napa Valley-

has built a “can’t miss” reputation. This is true across California, but especially so in Napa, where there are rarely difficult vintages and the grape has become the region’s unquestioned lead player, representing more than half of the valley’s total plantings (23,500 acres, up from 18,246 acres in 2010). The result has been an ongoing string of excellent vintages.

But with Mother Nature, there is always variability. Difficult years such as 2017 and 2011 demonstrate that Napa is not immune to viticultural challenges. Even when quality remains high, benchmark vintages are rare, by definition. So while there have been a number of strong harvests since 2006, it was 2016 that alone stood out from the pack. This is no longer true now that 2018 has arrived, earning its spot on the podium while nudging 2016 aside. Yes, the 2018 vintage is that good.

Since my previous report on California Cabernet Sauvignon (“Out of the Frying Pan ...,” Nov. 15, 2020), I have reviewed nearly 800 wines in blind tastings at our Napa office, more than 460 of which are from the 2018 vintage. Of the 2018s tasted so far, a very impressive 13% (61 in total) have earned classic ratings of 95 points or higher on Wine Spectator’s 100-point scale. That’s already more than the 56 classic-rated 2016s (out of more than 725 reviewed), with a significant number of 2018 releases still to come. Nearly 300 additional bottlings from 2018 have earned outstanding ratings of 90 to 94 points.

Leading the way among the 2018s is the MacDonald Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville 2018 (98 points, \$185). Brothers Alex and Graeme MacDonald farm some of the oldest Cabernet vines in the valley, in the heart of the famed To Kalon Vineyard in Oakville. Their 2018 bottling is a large-scaled yet wonderfully



defined red that pumps along with a torrent of cassis and crushed plum fruit, followed by a second wave of steeped blackberry and boysenberry flavors. Underneath, there's a well-embedded singed alder note and a steady tug of warm, gravelly earth. Racy licorice snap and sassafras hints chime through the finish, adding more energy to this impressively terroir-driven wine.

"The curtain just never closed," Graeme says about the 2018 season's long-running harvest. "People could do what they wanted when they wanted. So deciding when to pick, to get exactly what you wanted from even just individual rows, was easy. Everyone had a chance to make a great wine in 2018. This is a vintage where the entire valley looks good."

Other top 2018s in this report include the Accendo Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2018 (97, \$365), Dalla Valle Maya Napa Valley 2018 (97, \$450), Dominus Estate Napa Valley 2018 (97, \$269), Eisele Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2018 (97, \$450), Ridge Monte Bello Santa Cruz Mountains 2018 (97, \$230) and newcomer Kinsman Eades Cabernet Sauvignon Diamond Mountain District Rhadamanthus 2018 (97, \$265). Joining this group with wines at 97 points are multiple bottlings from both Colgin and Schrader Cellars.

"The 2018s have a bit more vibrancy and detail than 2016, which is saying a lot," says winemaker Andy Erickson, who produces his own Favia line with his viticulturist wife Annie Favia while also consulting for Mayacamas and Dalla Valle wineries as well as Constellation Brands on its Highest Beauty project. "The wines are dark and rich, but the terroir comes through and there's lots of nuance. It's a classic, period."

For the year's combination of both fruit- and terroir-driven elements as well as its amazing consistency across the board, I give the 2018 vintage for California Cabernet a 99-point rating overall. This puts 2018 a step ahead of 2016, making it the highest-rated vintage ever for the region.

Cabernet Sauvignon relishes drought, but only to an extent, since all vines need water. The timing between periods of rain and periods of drought is critical, but that timing differs from year to year, and the pattern does not always line up beneficially for quality. Too severe a drought can result in maturity blockages, while too much rain can wind up as dilution. In 2018, though, it was the previous winter that laid the foundation for what was to come, while the season itself never saw any extremes.

"In November of 2017, we had above-average rain, but then December was dry, so the soils got a chance to drain out, giving the soil the air it needed," says Tod Mostero, winemaker at Christian Moueix's Dominus Estate. "Organic material needs water, air and warmth to thrive in the soil. While overall the total rainfall was less than normal, a year is more than just harvesttime or summertime. It's the full year. If the water is well-timed, as it was in 2018, it's not necessarily a guarantee of quality in the end wine, but it's very important."

The organic material that Mostero refers to is what the vines essentially transform into terroir, the distinctive sense of place that is expressed by great wine. The boost the soils got heading into 2018, after a long run of drought-influenced vintages, can not be overemphasized as a factor in the vintage's greatness.

After the beneficially wet start, the 2018 growing season burst into action. Canopies were vigorous, thanks to the additional moisture. There was significant shatter as the flowering saw some spotty rains. But starting in June the season experienced dry and warm conditions, with very steady temperatures and no heat spikes. These factors led to a long and even ripening period for the grapes, without the threat of sunburn (thanks to healthy canopies) or dehydration (due to sufficient water from the early-season rains). With the combination of a heavy crop set and robust canopy growth, there was always work to be done in the vineyards, but the pace was never forced or rushed.



Accendo
Cellars

Napa Valley
CABERNET SAUVIGNON
2018

“A textural, intellectual wine, so beautifully built, quietly confident, distinguished and subtle, with a precise, classic structure. It’s like a ballerina: graceful, elegant and refined, but with immense power and strength.”

- Nigel Kinsman, winemaker

TASTING NOTES

The nose of this wine is layered and multi-faceted, exploding with savory aromas of cedar, coffee, bay laurel, eucalyptus, rosemary, pine/oak forest, chaparral, and sage, all lifted by a captivating floral perfume redolent of iris and violets. Blue fruit aromas of blackberries and blueberries linger in the background, gradually evolving into notes of loam and clay. In the mouth, the wine shows its incredible energy and vibrancy, power and density. The flavors mirror the aromas of mouthwatering savory notes reverberating with fresh acidity. The wine and the tannins are dense, yet the tannins are super fine grained and resolve effortlessly in the mouth.

97pts | Wine Spectator

“A lush and inviting style, with gorgeous, velvety waves of cassis, steeped plum and warmed blackberry preserves rolling along, underscored with black licorice and roasted vanilla throughout. The finish is seriously deep and long, with a subtle tug of warm loam lingering with the fruit. Hard to lay off now for its fruit, but this has loads in reserve for the cellar. Drink now through 2040.”

James Molesworth, Wine Spectator, July 2021

“The clusters were numerous but loose,” says Colgin Cellars winemaker Allison Tauziet. “There was significant shatter from the rainy spring. But the benefit was we got that filtered light around the clusters, which helps even things out through the season.”

Many producers now prefer to carry as full a crop as possible into the latter part of the season, then make canopy thinning and green harvesting decisions after veraison. The 2018 season allowed for that in a pressure-free environment.

“I drop for uniformity and to slow down ripening,” says Diana Snowden Seysses of Snowden Vineyards. “I like to dial [the yield] back as we see how the vintage is shaping up. In 2018, you had the time to adapt to what was needed because there was no weather event that forced your hand. That allowed for longer hang time but with moderate temperatures, which meant tannin and flavor development without higher alcohol levels.”

The Snowden Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Brothers Vineyard 2018 (95, \$90) is a gorgeous wine, with a ripe, warm and very polished feel to its alluring flavors of cassis, plum reduction and melted black licorice, while sleek alder, loam and bay leaf accents form the backdrop for a long and steady finish.

While the weather provided an ideal setup for producers to bring in high quality grapes, the season wasn’t without concerns. Wildfires, which played destructive roles in the 2020 and 2017 harvests, also affected 2018; yet in this case, they helped. The fires in 2018 were located farther north, and their smoke was neither a concern in the vineyards (where it can settle on the grapes and lead to smoketainted wines) nor a disruption to the logistics of harvesttime. Instead, the smoke was higher up in the atmosphere, resulting in a reduction of sunlight that helped to slow the ripening process.

“It acted as a filter,” says Snowden of the smoke. “There was no impact on flavor—you couldn’t even

smell it. But you could tell, visually, the sunlight just wasn't as strong in 2018. It was so steady, so even, which again helped to give us that long hang time we like."

The long and easy growing season turned into a long and easy harvest window, which was another positive for 2018. "Vigor was in check and there were no heat waves during the growing season," says Eisele Vineyard winemaker Spencer Kelly. "Then harvest lasted one month instead of one to two weeks. It was long, slow and even ripening that allowed for easy picking. And because the season ran late and ripening occurred in a cooler period at the end, there's a touch of throwback in the wine."

The '18 Eisele bottling offers a gorgeous display of warm cassis, mulled plum and macerated blackberry fruit stitched with those subtle "throwback" hints of loam, juniper and bay leaf. This is a huge wine, but still reserved in style, with warm earth tones reverberating through the lengthy finish and dovetailing perfectly with the suave fruit.

The long harvest also proved beneficial to producers by giving them the time to pick smaller-than-usual portions of their vineyards, sometimes just individual rows within parcels, exactly when they wanted to. With many growing seasons coming to a quick end due to extreme heat, it's rare for vintners to get the kind of extra pixelation in their wines that micro-picks can bring.

If there was a final hurdle to the 2018 growing season, it came as the fruit started to come into winery cellars. As the picking began, it was the larger berry size and volume of crop that had some producers wondering whether the wines would have the structure necessary for balance. But again, thanks to the lack of time pressure, winemakers were easily able to get a handle on the personality of the vintage.

"We'd send out a crew for a pick with 10 bins and they'd ask for 10 more, which had me nervous at the start," says Thomas Rivers Brown, owner of his own Rivers-Marie label and winemaker for nearly four dozen other top labels in the valley, including Schrader, Hobel, Outpost, Gemstone and more. "I was thinking it might be like '12 as the fruit started coming in, because the berry size and yield was similar. But the concentration from the resulting hang time was totally different, and as we moved through the vinifications we began to see the structure more and more. In the end, we had berry size like '12 and concentration like '13, which was weird. But once we figured that out—and that long harvest window gave us the time to figure it out—I think we got better and better as it went along."

The Rivers-Marie Cabernet Sauvignon St. Helena Panek Vineyard 2018 (95, \$110) shows the vivid yet restrained profile of the vintage, with a racy mix of cassis, plum and blackberry fruit flavors inlaid deftly with hints of loam, sweet tobacco and bitter-sweet ganache. The wine stays fresh and driven through the

Rating Napa Cabernet Vintages			
2018	99	A wet winter provided sufficient water through the dry, warm, even-keeled season. Ripening was slow under full canopies, and the drawn-out harvest allowed producers to pick when they wanted. A spectacular year, with wines that are rich and dark, but detailed, restrained in style and very terroir-driven	Hold
2017	92	Drought broke over the winter, with lots of vegetation and healthy vines to start the season. Good growing season turned wickedly hot in early September, with no cooling-off period, then wildfires raged in early October, raising the specter of smoke taint. Napa's most difficult season in recent memory	Drink or hold
2016	98	The final drought-influenced vintage of the run since 2012, this time without serious heat spikes. Rockier soils and drier spots ripened first, while heavier soils allowed for longer hang time. Wines show intense fruit against the backdrop of their varying terroirs; crop still down from normal	Hold
2015	94	The fourth drought-influenced year in a row, plus a cold spell during flowering led to significantly lower yields. The smaller crop ripened quickly, though, with picking beginning in August. Quality is high but more variable than 2016 or 2013, as sugars sometimes raced ahead of phenolics	Drink or hold
2014	95	Heavy rains in late winter gave the vines an early boost—though not enough to break the drought—and from there warm, dry conditions led to an early harvest. Quality is very consistent, with the wines showing power, depth and extra aromatic range. A beautiful vintage with a distinct signature	Drink or hold
2013	97	A nearly flawless growing season, with moderate temperatures throughout and no heat spikes or rain. Earliest harvest in 25 years started in August, but Indian summer conditions allowed growers to pick blocks as they wanted through late October. Wines brim with fruit and structure. A no-brainer benchmark	Drink or hold

Notable older vintages: 2012, 2010, 2009, 2008, 2007, 2006, 2004, 1999, 1997, 1996, 1995, 1994, 1987, 1986, 1985, 1984, 1978, 1974, 1970, 1968, 1958, 1951, 1941, 1936

Note that most California Cabernets are drinkable within a few years of release.

Vintage ratings: 95-100, classic; 90-94, outstanding; 85-89, very good; 80-84, good; 75-79, mediocre; 50-74, not recommended. **Drinkability:** "NYR" means most wines of the vintage are yet to be released; "drink" means most of the wines of the vintage are ready to drink; "hold" means most of the ageworthy wines have yet to fully mature.

finish, with the fruit and earth notes working together in tandem.

While the 2018 Cabernets showcase ample fruit and lovely displays of terroir, they are also very structured, carried by graphite or iron spines. This distinguishes them from the opulent 2015s or the polished 2016s. Producers who backed off on extractions wound up with stellar results.

“We were just lighter in terms of extractions, compared with previous vintages,” explains Maya Dalla Valle, winemaker at her family’s namesake estate. “We got normal phenolics at lower sugars, and the long harvest have us the time to play with cold soaks and micro-fermentations. 2018 was also the first vintage we experimented with clay amphorae to ferment a tiny portion of the crop. All that extra care and thought versus the quick or last-second decisions we often have to make, I think it shows in the wines.”

The Dalla Valle Maya Napa Valley 2018 (97, \$450) delivers an initial torrent of cassis, plum and blackberry fruit that is slowly harnessed as it moves through the wine, thanks to guardrails of graphite, cast iron and smoldering tobacco. This is a seriously long and remarkably refined version, despite its obvious muscle, with the iron note reverberating through the fruit at the end.

In general, the 2018s are vivid yet restrained in profile, with copious fruit that isn’t at all bombastic. The structures are fine-grained and very linear, giving the wines outstanding length. The terroir shows through. It’s a vintage of very poised wines.

“I see similarities to 2006, 2013 and 2015, because they were all warm early and cool late as well,” says Mostero. “But ’18 is a quieter, more centered vintage. There’s even a touch of mystery to the wines, unlike the other years.”

The quality of the 2018 vintage plays out across Napa, from the flats of the valley floor up into the mountain appellations. The Bella Oaks Rutherford 2018 (95, \$275), from the famed vineyard of the same name, shows the deep, reserved well of fruit that is the year’s hallmark, allied to an iron twinge and a swath of loam. Also impressive, the Boich Family Cabernet Sauvignon Mount Veeder Wall Road Vineyard 2018 (93, \$170) features a vivid core of anise, cassis, plum and boysenberry flavors streaming through, laced with the violet, saffron and iron notes that highlight the classic profile of Mount Veeder. (For more on Bella Oaks, Boich Family and other new projects of note, see the profiles on page 53.)

Golden State Cabernet Sauvignon, particularly from Napa, overwhelming resides in the realm of triple-digit prices, which can be frustrating for wine lovers. But there are also excellent bargains to be had in 2018, thanks to a large, high quality crop. More than 100 wines covered in this report cost \$50 or less while rating 88 points or higher, nearly two-thirds of these from 2018.

Mount Veeder Winery leads the way in this category, with its Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2018 (93, \$44), once again the best buy in ageworthy, character-filled Cabernet. As strong as this wine has been in recent years, it is likely to be getting an upgrade soon, as Rivers Brown will now help oversee production with the winery’s talented in-house winemaker, Niki Williams. Among the other terrific value-priced bottlings in this report, one particularly affordable version is Joel Gott’s focused and balanced Cabernet Sauvignon California 815 2018 (89, \$18).

There are also some late-release 2017s that are worth seeking out. Although the 2017 vintage was not in the same league as its recent siblings, Napa’s elite producers showed their skill. There are exemplary releases from Abreu, Harlan and Bond as well as from Dunn, Larkmead, Ulysses and Kamen, the latter hailing from Sonoma Mountain. (For a more detailed look at the 2017 Cabernets, see last year’s tasting report.)

The 2018 vintage for Cabernet Sauvignon is a rare bird. It melds the powerfully expressive fruit that California is known for with an underlying terroir-driven persona that sets the wines apart. This is a year with the quiet confidence of maturity and experience, rather than the irreverence and rambunctiousness of youth, allowing the vineyards of Napa Valley to speak eloquently for themselves. 2018 is the new modern benchmark for California Cabernet, hands down.

Senior editor James Molesworth is Wine Spectator’s lead taster on California Cabernet Sauvignon.