

The New California Cabernet



Now is the time to venture outside of Napa for Cabs of style, structure and value.

BY STEVE HEIMOFF

It happens. Ask any retailer or sommelier. Maybe not often, but it happens: even when a Cabernet Sauvignon bottle clearly states that it comes from another appellation—Sonoma County, for example—some consumers (not readers of this magazine, of course) will look at the label and ask, “What part of Napa Valley is Sonoma in?” “There are still people who think there’s no Cabernet in California save for Napa,” says Kendall-Jackson’s hemmed wine-muster, Randy Ullom.

California’s output of Cabernet Sauvignon is vast. Nearly a third of a million tons were crushed in 2008, more than any variety besides Chardonnay and Zinfandel.

To those of us lucky enough to taste widely in California, it’s clear that Napa has some competition out there, and it bears mentioning: great Cab from beyond Napa.

From Paso Robles in the south, through the Santa Cruz Mountains and on up into Sonoma’s warmer appellations, Cabernet Sauvignons of style and appeal are emerging. They show different qualities from Napa, of course, but what’s wrong with that? Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon is pretty much as good as it can get—at least, it’s hard to see where it goes from here. But Cabs from other areas offer proof that, as we shake into this second decade of the 21st century, Napa’s stranglehold on Cabernet is loosening.

There are reasons aplenty why Cab’s quality is on the increase. “The locations for the better Cabernets have been more clearly identified,” says Nick Goldschmidt.

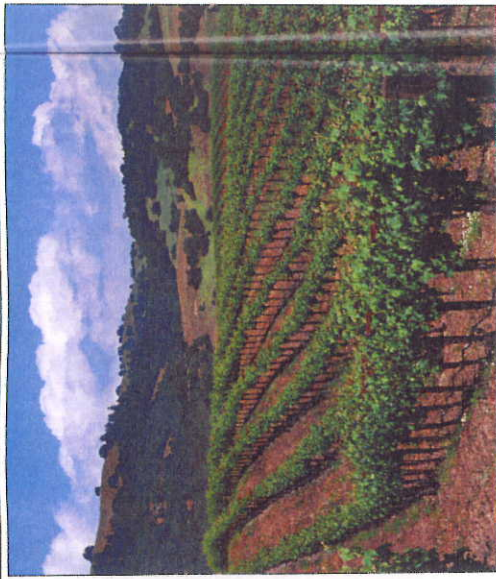


of the Goldschmidt and Forcathers brands. Generally, this means warmer, but not overly hot, areas where the grapes can fully ripen, and thin, infertile, well-drained soils. Cabernet, as the old saying goes, dislikes wet feet.

Then too, today's plethora of clonal selections and rootstocks allows vintners to maximize terrain. "We match each variety, rootstock and clone to the site," says Jordan Fiorentini, the director of winemaking at Chalk Hill Winery. As an example, she says, "You might match a de-stemming rootstock to an overly-vigorous soil," which will limit nutrient uptake, thus stressing the vine. Ullom, at KJ, points to the importance of mountain and hillside vineyards, whose natural lack of water-holding capacity makes for more concentrated, age-worthy Cabs. Intensity also is given a boost by more severe pruning, which limits yields, but then, of course, the vintner will hope to charge more money for the resulting wine. "We've gone to single-cluster [yields], three tons or less," explains Fred Holloway, the winemaker at Justin in Paso Robles, citing a theme common among ultrapremium Cabernet makers. All these factors allow winemakers to produce Cabernets of greater depth and interest than ever before in California's long history.

If you look at the map on the opposite page, you can see California's fairly narrow Cabernet band, running up from Central California to the North Coast. It's generally two to three coastal mountain ranges inland, where the maritime influence is less than along the immediate coast (which is too cold for Cabernet, but more suitable for Pinot Noir and Syrah). But the Cabernet band also is a mountain range, or two, removed from the Central Valley, which is too hot for almost anything.

This sweet spot long has had its rationales, for historical, sentimental and economic reasons, in Napa Valley. But with the maturation of the wine industry, and with the technical pace of change occurring at breakneck speed, there's no reason why regions with climate and soils similar to Napa's should not emerge in the Cabernet spotlight. There are some of the top performers over recent vintages.



KNIGHTS VALLEY: LITTLE KNOWN, BUT AN EMERGING SUPERSTAR

Even wine-savvy consumers would be hard-pressed to say much about Knights Valley. Little-traveled, with few tourist amenities, it was put on the map as a wine district by the Peter Michael Winery, whose coveted wines most people will never see.

Easier to find, and just as good, are certain Kendall-Jackson bottlings, such as their 2007 Highlands Estates Trace Ridge Cabernet Sauvignon (94 points, \$70). This is a wine that scores highly every vintage. "The vineyard is halfway between Alexander Valley and Napa Valley, with elevations up to 1,000 feet," Ullom says, showing once again that Cabernet loves a hillside. Ullom describes the climate. "It can be warm up there, but we lose three degrees with every 1,000 feet of elevation, and when fog hits, which it can from three directions, it cools it quite down." His description of the tannins is a good one: "Big, but juicy and round, versus your power, super-linear Veeder tannins."

Other fine Knights Valley Cabernet producers: Knights Bridge, Ehret



PHOTOS LEFT: JON VAIL/STORBEN; RIGHT: KLAUSHEITZ/CENAS; FERRY: ALEXANDER/CENAS

ALEXANDER VALLEY LEADS THE WAY

Of all the sources for great Cabernet wine, winemaker at Rodney Strong, net Sauvignon beyond Napa Valley, warns that valley floor Cabernet can be this quintessential Sonoma valley is have "that Alexander Valley green the main contender. Its Cabernets beean, bell pepper [aroma] if you used to have a reputation for don't battle vigor... but it's herbaceousness, but that dates to a easier to manage [a vine] up a hill... period when most of the vines were Rodney Strong's 2006 Rockaway Cabernet Sauvignon (96 points, Nowadays, the action is up in the hills.

There are so many good Cabernet golden chain of vineyards on the western slope of the Mayacamas between Geyserville and Healdsburg that it's hard to believe there was little or no Cabernet in Alexander Valley before the 1970s. The thrust of the last 10 or 15 years has been to move Cabernet into the hills, an expensive proposition Verite, Simi, Robert Young, Fore-gation, terracing) that needs to be developed. Rick Sayre, the long-

DRY CREEK VALLEY:

NOT JUST ZINFANDEL AND SAUVIGNON BLANC ANYMORE

This warm to hot valley is isolated within a box canyon of coastal mountains, but receives cool influences up from the Russian River Valley and, less obviously, down from Lake Sonoma. Dry Creek Cabernets long possessed a certain rusticity, as if the briary, brambly earthiness of the valley's mainstay, Zinfandel, were transferred to Cabernet.

These days, fine Cabs are emerging that are more rewarding. Again, elevation plays a key role. Gallo Family Vineyards 2006 Frei Ranch Cabernet Sauvignon (92 points, \$35) comes from grapes grown between 350-450 feet in the valley's eastern hills; on the other side is Alexander Valley. "Frei Ranch is cooler than Alexander Valley," notes winemaker Gina Gallo, pointing to Lake Sonoma as a sort of air conditioner. The vineyard's soils are stony and rocky, "as opposed to the deeper soils on the valley floor, where you get softer, riper wines," Gallo observes. The best Dry Creek Cabs are from the hills, either on the east side or the west. They offer a tighter, crisper, drier structure than a typical Napa Cab.

Other fine Dry Creek Valley Cabernet producers: Dry Creek Vineyard, Rafanelli, Rued, Fritz



AND DON'T FORGET...

There are additional appellations in California that good Cabernet can come from: Carmel Valley (Galante), Chalk Hill (Chalk Hill Winery), Livermore Valley (the very fine Steven Kent brand), Sonoma Mountain (Laurel Glen and Peters Family, which is on a roll), Sonoma Valley (B.R. Cohn, Sharqia, Louis M. Martini, Kunde) and Cameros (Clas Pegasus, Truchard). Sonoma County as a whole offers very good blended Cabs from Chateau St. Jean, Arrowood, Schug and Kenwood. And for a multi-county appellation, there's nothing to match the stunning power of Pride Mountain's Napa-Sonoma blends. A word about eastern Santa Barbara County. Much has been written about the new Happy Canyon AVA and the possibilities there for distinguished Cabernet. A few wineries, notably Star Lane, are pushing the envelope, but years remain to see if the effort has legs.

PASO ROBLES: THE BEST OF THE CENTRAL COAST

California's sprawling Central Coast, running from Monterey down to Santa Barbara, has so far spawned only a single classic appellation for Cabernet. Yet, historically, Paso Robles Cabs have not been very interesting. There were exceptions, Eberle chief among them. But the hot climate too often resulted in soft, flabby wines of high alcohol that could be

strangely unbalanced, with green flavors and residual sugar.

Thankfully, that is rapidly changing. The best red wines are blends, often of strange-bedfellow varieties like Merlot and Petite Sirah. But Cabernet is on the hunt, and Justin has led the charge. The 2007 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon (93 points, \$45) was, as winemaker Holloway points out, sourced from the area that seems best suited for Cab in this largish appellation, the Adelajida Hills, which are southerly outcroppings of the same Santa Lucia Mountains that, in Monterey, burst forth in Highlands Pinot Noir glory.

It's a warmish area. Holloway credits limestone in the soil (rare in California) for helping to stress the vines, in a positive way. He emphasizes a technique, open-top fermentation, that Justin didn't start using until 2007. "That lets us volatilize off high alcohol," a constant threat to Paso Robles Cabernet. "And also, in 2007 we went from whole-cluster sorting to berry sorting." The latter, while considerably more hands-on (and expensive), allows careful sorters to pick out shriveled, raisined grapes. That in itself is a way to lower alcohol. "Because so much of the water is gone from the raisin, it raises the amount of sugar, so your potential alcohol goes up," Holloway explains.

Other fine Paso Robles Cabernet producers: J. Lohr, Cass, Venteux, Eberle, Falcone, Skyhawk Lane, Zoller



SANTA CRUZ MOUNTAINS: THE EAST RIDGE IS BORDEAUX COUNTRY

This mountainous region, just south of San Francisco and high above Silicon Valley, was once home to some of California's greatest Cabernet Sauvignons. Then came Prohibition, followed by urban development, which forced out most of the vineyards. Today, however, "there isn't a square inch left [to be developed]," says Ken Wornick, the founder and winemaker of tiny La Honda Winery, whose 2006 Lonehawk Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon (93 points, \$43) comes from an 1,800-foot vineyard close to the famed Ridge Montebello vineyard.

You can think of the Santa Cruz Mountains as a bipolar appellation. West of the ridgeline, where the maritime influence is strong, coast Redwoods dominate the slopes, watered, as it were, by incessant fogs. This is Pinot Noir country. But east of the ridgeline "is classic Santa Cruz Mountains Cabernet terroir," Wornick notes. "Warm, arid and steep, with shallow soils" that, with their madrones and other drought-resistant plants, look and feel like the slopes of the Mayacamas.

Other fine Santa Cruz Mountains Cabernet producers: Thomas Fogarty, Mount Eden, Martin Ray, Cinnabar, Cooper-Garrod 