

Napa Valley Cabernets



By Bobby Lee Lawrence



That chill in the air you are feeling is a reminder that it is harvest time in Napa Valley, the most famous of the wine producing regions in Northern California. Napa Valley contains more than 15 terroirs*, ranging from Carneros in the south to Calistoga in the north. Although each terroir has subtle differences, in general, the area is almost perfect for growing grapes.

The cooler weather also signals the release of the 2002 (and some 2003) harvest wines. We wine lovers have been eagerly awaiting this event. In early tasting, the 2002 Cabernets appear to be one of the best vintages in recent years. An abundance of sunshine in 2002, which translates into high sugar content in the grapes, creates a challenge for winemakers; long hang time (the time grapes stay on the vine until harvest) will cause excess ripeness. More sugar translates into higher alcohol content after fermentation. Proper balance is critical, so the winemakers must carefully monitor the exact time harvest should take place.

The 2002 vintage is on par with wines released in 1991 and 1992 - not as good as the 1997 or 1999, but close. In my opinion, five to ten years of aging for a California Cabernet still leaves the wine fresh and enjoyable; allowing it to age further, in hopes of its improving, could be a mistake. So, drink up; those '91 and '92 cabs should be consumed by now!

I am finding that choosing a favorite Cabernet from the 2002 vintage is presenting quite a challenge; with almost four-hundred Napa Valley wineries producing Cabernet, where does one begin? Just for the record, in evaluating my selections I don't consume the entire bottle. Don't get me wrong; it's not that I don't want to, it's that after

tasting a number of different cabernets things tend to get a little fuzzy.

Frequent readers of my column know that I continue to use price vs. quality as a guideline in selecting what I feel are the best values. With this method I can eliminate about half of the wineries right off the top. This is not to say that a bottle of Cabernet priced at two-hundred plus dollars is not worth the cost, but that selection will be limited to a much smaller group of wine enthusiasts. I feel it is also important that the wines I recommend be available locally.

Over one-hundred of the 2002 releases rated 91 points or better; they include some well-known wineries, as well as many boutique producers. Let's look at some of the best of breed.

You can choose the 2002 Harlan Estate Napa Valley with a bottle price of \$245.00, or the 2002 Colgin Cabernet Tychson Hill Vineyard priced at \$250.00. Or, coming back down to earth, you can pick up one of my recommendations, a 2002 Sebastiani Alexander Valley Appellation Selection for as little as \$28.00 MSRP. This wine is rated at 91 points, drinkable now and will also age well into 2010.

Another excellent choice is the 2003 Seduction from O'Brien Cellars, priced at \$28.00. This handcrafted,

Bordeaux-style wine from the Oak Knoll District (AVA) of Napa Valley may be one of the great finds of this release and, in my opinion, has been underrated. With sensual, deep color and provocative aromas of plum, dried cherry, and currents, it finishes long. Cedar and vanilla overtones, a result of the oak aging, add pleasantly to the finish. One only needs to drink the first glass to understand why the name "Seduction" is so appropriate. The O'Brien Cellars Winery is not open to the public but you can order from your local wine shop or online at www.obrienfamilyvineyard.com.




Let's explore some additional Napa wines: Provenance Vineyards 2002 Cabernet Sauvignon Rutherford was de-stemmed prior to fermentation, reducing the tannins somewhat. This process, as well as carefully separating the skins from the juice, resulted in an elegant but powerfully rich wine. Expect aromas of cocoa powder, red currents, and rosemary. It has a long finish that is liqueur-like, with a flavor of rum raisin. It's a great choice to pair with red meat or any hearty dish such as rich pasta. You should be able to pick this wine up for about \$35.00.


Turnbull Winery created their 2002 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon with grapes from five different vineyards, resulting in an extraordinary wine. Blossom Creek Vineyard was the most significant contributor. Combining 91% Cabernet grapes, with 3% Cabernet Franc, 3% Syrah and 3% Merlot creates a blend that typically results in a soft and long finish. Aromas of cherry fruit and bittersweet chocolate dominate with some spice at the end. This wine is priced at \$40.00 MSRP and is a bargain.

As you can see, California's Napa Valley wines tend to be a little pricey but, in most cases, it is justified. Napa Valley still reigns as the world's best producer of Cabernet. Years of experimentation, employing some of the world's best winemakers, near-perfect and consistent climate, ideal soil and an element that can't be measured - love of the grape - have resulted in wines that are world class.

Remember, Cabernet Sauvignon is considered the King of Wine. So, with your next meal or special occasion, drink this "Nectar of the Gods."

* Terroirs- refers to the total impact of given site, i.e.; slope, soil, orientation of the sun, elevation, total rainfall, accumulated hours of sunshine, etc. 

NAPA VALLEY?
WOULD YOU BELIEVE, THE UPPER VALLEY?


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