

WINE News

*New vintage, new reason
to love California wine.*



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Fightin' Varietals: California's Top Two Plus Zin

By Ryan Woodhouse

In this edition of *Wine News* we'll explore the current state of California Chardonnay, celebrate California's wealth of old vine Zinfandel vineyards, and reveal some of the best values in Napa Valley Cabernet. Let's start with the remarkable wines of Madson.

Madson Wines: Santa Cruz Mountains Rising Star

If you haven't yet heard about or tasted the wines from Cole Thomas at Madson, that's likely because they are so tiny, many of their wines are just a barrel or two! In fact, if you look on their website, almost everything is *sold out!* However, once you have tasted their wines, you won't quickly forget them. I think this young winery is crafting some of the most exciting wines in the region.

Doing his apprenticeship under Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard's winemaking legend, Jeff Emery, Cole Thomas makes his Madson bottlings in the same cellar, on Ingalls Street on the west side of Santa Cruz. Madson is a collaboration between Cole and vineyard manager Ken Sweggles. In his own right, Ken is quickly becoming known as a "grape whisperer." He's taken on vineyards throughout the mountains, and uses meticulous organic farming methods to elevate quality. This partnership is clear to see in the wines, as Cole's non-interventionist winemaking provides just enough framework to capture the purity of fruit and sense of place without leaving heavy fingerprints on the finished product. The wines aren't big or flashy. They are incredibly pure,

refined, and have immaculate balance across the board. Madson's style is very contemporary—or "New California," as Jon Bonné would say. But at the same time, the wines have a grounded, classical, timeless feel. Nothing seems contrived or forced. Right now we have three wines from Madson, but I hope to keep carrying everything they make available to us. They're not to be missed.

2016 Madson Santa Cruz Mountains Chardonnay (\$22.95) A bright, fresh, racy style from mature vines growing in Portola Valley. The small berries of the Wente clone of Chardonnay and the Franciscan shale soils make for a powerful but linear style of wine, unadorned by oak, and crafted very deliberately minimalist, to let the quality of the fruit and the complexity of the soil shine through.

2017 Madson Anderson Valley Pinot Noir (\$36.95) A rare departure from the Santa Cruz Mountains for Madson, but this is pure Pinot perfection. From a cool site in Anderson Valley and fermented 100% whole cluster, the wine is a hauntingly aromatic, elegant expression. Matured in a once-used French oak barrel (yes, just one barrel) and bottled unfinned and unfiltered.

2017 Madson "Ascona Vineyard" Santa Cruz Mountains Syrah (\$32.95) Hand-picked from just three rows of Syrah in the young but widely heralded Ascona vineyard in the summit subregion of the Santa Cruz Mountains. Exactly what I love from true cool climate Syrah: violets, freshly ground peppercorns, dark berries, smoked meat. Lithe and energetic on the palate from the whole cluster fermentation.

Cover: Zinfandel grapes ripen for the 2019 vintage in the Sonoma Valley.

The Golden Era of Golden State Chardonnay

California Chardonnay continues to be dogged by the stereotype that it is invariably big, rich, buttery, and oaky. However, this is a long way from the truth. In fact, there are so many precise, focused, restrained examples of the variety being produced right now, that when I'm asked by someone for a big, buttery style, I have to think hard about what I'm going to recommend! I would guess that bright, balanced, judiciously oaked California Chardonnays outnumber oaky butter bombs on our shelves five to one. Even brands that have long been made in that richer style have, by and large, dialed down the ripeness, new oak, and diacetyl ("butter flavor"), and are now making wines with more acidity and verve. During a recent tasting with our staff, the 2018 Rombauer Carneros Chardonnay—the queen of big California Chard—was found to be significantly less overtly buttery than most people's preconceptions suggested. And while still showing a pretty good lick of oak, the wine was quite vibrant and bright.

So if California Chardonnay is no longer dominated by oaky-buttery monsters, what does the modern face of Calif. Chard look like? I'd like to suggest that the current strength of the category is rooted in its diversity and lack of a dominant style. I think winemakers feel free to put their own spin on what California Chard should look (or rather feel and taste) like. The lack of a dominant formula also allows for truly transparent, site-driven wines, true wines of place, further diversifying the expressions coming from all across the state. I think we're in a golden era from Golden State Chard. Perhaps the only stumbling block for continued success is knowing what you're getting when you pull an unfamiliar bottle from the shelf—but hey, that's where your good old-fashioned wine merchant comes in, right? Here are a few wines I'd recommend checking out. For simplicity's sake, I have listed them from brightest and most racy to bigger and richer:

2017 Le P'tit Paysan "Jack's Hill" Monterey

County Chardonnay (\$19.95) From Ian Brand, SF Chronicle's "Winemaker of the Year" 2018. From the western foothills of the Gabilan Mountains, planted in iron rich, decomposed granite soils, this very expressive, flavorful wine also has precise acidity that keeps the whole thing on a knife edge. Exceptional value. Don't miss this one. **92 WE**

2017 I. Brand & Family "Escolle Vineyard" Santa Lucia Highlands Chardonnay (\$29.95)

Another wine from Ian Brand, this time from the other side of the Salinas Valley in the Santa Lucia Highlands. The Escolle vineyard, owned and farmed by the Caraccioli family, has quickly become one of the most highly regarded vineyards in the region. Again, the acid line is pure and focused, but here Ian has built a bit more texture and phenolic power, with more lees contact and some subtle, nutty oak. This one will age beautifully. Another bargain given the quality and pedigree.

2017 Joyce "Submarine Canyon" Monterey County Chardonnay (\$19.95) Continuing the Monterey theme, Russell Joyce's wines are definitely worthy of your attention. This incorporates fruit from a few



different sites including Zabala in Arroyo Seco. Beautifully refined Chard. Perfectly ripe but with plenty of freshness and vivacity. What a steal at this price.

2017 Diatom "Katherine's" Santa Maria Valley Chardonnay

(\$29.95) A show-stopping bottle from Santa Barbara winemaking legend Greg Brewer. Sourced entirely from 48-year-old, own-rooted vines, and fermented in stainless steel with no malo, this wine has an almost incomprehensible combination of weightlessness and power, intensity and precision.

2016 Presqu'île Santa Maria Valley Chardonnay (\$34.95)

I love what has been happening at Presqu'île lately. In 2015 they brought in Jeremy Seysses of Domaine Dujac as a consultant, and within the first couple of vintages the quality has skyrocketed. The Santa Maria Valley bottling is estate fruit plus old vine Bien Nacido. While remaining very focused and linear, it has lots of power and phenolic density. Serious concentration of flavor.

2017 Morgan "Highland" Santa Lucia Highlands Chardonnay (\$23.95)

Keep an eye on Morgan's wines. This longtime stalwart has been reaching new heights, with winemaking now under the tutelage of Samuel Smith. The 2016 and 2017 vintages have been moving in a more Burgundy-inspired direction. This has some lovely, subtle reductive notes mingled with pristine and powerful fruit, plus wisps of oak spice and flint.

2015 Mindego Ridge "Estate" Santa Cruz Mountains Chardonnay (\$44.95)

A lovely wine from a little vineyard at the northwestern edge of the Santa Cruz Mountains. Fruit is grown by husband-and-wife team, David and Stacey Gollnick. The wine is expertly crafted by none other than Ehren Jordan of Failla. I love the combination of fresh, bright, cool climate SCM Chardonnay with Ehren's silky, lush, more exotic style of Chard. Beautifully done.

2017 Hartford Court "Four Hearts Vineyards" Russian River Valley Chardonnay (\$39.95)

A layered wine. Rich and flavorful, yet with plenty of energy and acidity. From old vines. Dense core of baked, caramelized orchard fruit, lemon curd, clove, river stone, and wisps of jasmine giving lovely floral lift. Round and creamy on the mid-palate, but drawn out long and fresh by the balanced acidity. Very complete.

2015 Ramey "Woolsey Road Vineyard" Russian River Valley Chardonnay (\$49.95)

A lovely example of a full-bodied California Chard done right. Big, rich fruit, poached pears, pie crust, brioche, crème brûlée. Lovely palate weight and texture. Stony minerals, well-judged oak and a savory, nutty lees character to counterbalance the big fruit. Classic style from a classic producer.



Why You Should Drink More Zin!

Zinfandel is the crown jewel of California's vinous treasure. Sure, Napa Valley produces world-class Cabernet, the Sonoma Coast flows with delicious Pinot Noir, the Sta. Rita Hills issue forth exquisite Chardonnay, and Paso Robles makes some of the most powerful Rhône-style varietals and blends on the planet. However, none of these can claim global hegemony over a varietal like California does with Zinfandel. While the grape probably originated in Croatia, most meaningful plantings of Zinfandel now reside in California. Zinfandel (and Zinfandel-dominant field blends) account for the vast majority of pre-Prohibition vines in California, and the history of some of these plantings could fill a dozen of these newsletters. For a fantastic resource on old vine vineyards in California, check out the **Historic Vineyard Society's website**.

When working in our stores I'm constantly recommending Zinfandel-based wines, for numerous reasons. First of all, the well-made ones are just flat-out delicious. Few grapes have the straight-up drinkability that Zin does. The fruit-driven aromas and flavors it can produce are a hedonist's dream. But it's not all fruit bombs and high-alcohol monsters. There are some very fresh, elegant expressions of the grape that will appeal to cool-climate Pinot Noir lovers, too. Secondly, I think old vine Zinfandel, or heritage field blends of Zin and its typical comrades (Carignan, Alicante Bouschet, Petite Sirah, Mourvèdre, Grenache, and so on) are more representative—or as the French might say, *typique*—of typical vinous expressions of California. These vineyards and the wines produced from them are truly unique to the region, and have no real comparable wines, anywhere else on the planet. I have sent many of K&L's overseas visitors home with Bedrock Heritage bottlings in place of their initial choice of a flashy Napa Cab, for exactly the reasons I outlined above. If you want California in a bottle, look no further than humble Zinfandel. I also believe we're currently drinking in an era when the grape has never been more revered, and is treated with respect, by a core group of producers who are making some of the finest Zin-based wines ever. The vines are old, the farming is better than ever, and the winemaking is informed and on-point. Furthermore, you can get a bottle of absolute top-notch Zin, from the best, oldest, most famous vineyards in the world, made by the most heralded winemakers to handle the varietal—and you'll still struggle to spend more than \$75, tops. You can't say that for Napa Cab or Burgundy!

Here are a few Zins to check out this fall season:

2017 Bedrock Wine Company "Old Vine" California Zinfandel (\$23.95) Probably my most recommended Zinfandel, period. You get the unrivalled vineyard knowledge and sourcing of the Bedrock team, plus their expertise in the cellar, for an absolute song. The average vine age here is 80-plus years, coming from vineyards such as: Evangelho, Bedrock, Nervo Ranch, and Teldeschi Ranch.



2018 Bedrock Wine Company "Bedrock Vineyard Heritage" Sonoma Valley Red Blend (\$49.95) Ground zero for Bedrock is this 131-year-old block in Sonoma Valley. Mostly Zin, but 27 varieties in all, including around 20% Carignan and 5% Mataro. One of the best examples of an old vine field blend you'll find anywhere, and being Bedrock's eponymous site, and home vineyard, you have to think this one gets even a little more attention to detail. This is exactly what I mean when I say: "vinous treasure."

2016 Ledge "Dante Dusi Vineyard" Paso Robles Zinfandel (\$29.95) Planted back in the 1920s, these head-trained, dry-farmed vines visible from Highway 101 are some of the most sought-after in the region. Winemaker Mark Adams, longtime assistant winemaker at Saxum, brings a huge skill set to the table. This particular wine is fermented wild, 50% whole cluster, and aged in neutral puncheons (double size barrels). The wine has a lift and vitality unlike many other Paso Zins. Check it out.



2017 Ridge Vineyards "Geyserville" Alexander Valley Zinfandel (\$39.95) Sourced from mostly 130-year-old Zinfandel vines, this is a blend of 68% Zinfandel, 18% Carignan, 12% Petite Sirah, and 2% Alicante Bouschet. One of the most ageworthy Zins out there, this often lasts for 10- to 15-plus years. Still one of the best values in all of the wine world.

2017 Carlisle "Piner-Olivet Ranches" Russian River Valley Zinfandel (\$39.95) Mike Officer is one of the true guardians of old vine Zinfandel in California. His passion for these old vineyards centers around a very specific subregion in the Russian River Valley. Piner-Olivet is the intersection of two roads at the epicenter of old vines in the region. Fruit comes from: Carlisle (1927), Papera (1930), and Montafi (1926). Incredible stuff.



2016 Mike and Molly Hendry "R.W. Moore Vineyard" Napa Valley Zinfandel (\$34.95) From vines planted in 1905–06 in what is now known as the Coombsville sub-AVA of Napa Valley. Just two miles northeast of downtown Napa, this vineyard is also known as the "Earthquake Vineyard." Potently aromatic, silky tannins, and high-toned fruit. Pure and powerful.

2016 Maitre de Chai "Stampede Vineyard" Lodi Zinfandel (\$29.95) Vines were planted in the 1940s, own rooted. Soils are decomposed granite right at the base of the Sierra Nevada. Winemakers Marty Winters and Alex Pitts describe this wine as an ode to Paul Draper of Ridge Vineyards, for his classical style of restraint and finesse. I'd say they nailed it—it's a very elegant style, nothing in excess.



Yes, There Is Value in Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon!

Really? Value in Napa Cab? Yes, it's true, Napa Valley Cab ain't getting any cheaper. And every year there seems to be more and more \$200 to \$500 wines being produced—some of which I've never even heard of! Every time a major report on the valley is published by Wine Advocate, Vinous, Jeb Dunnuck, etc, it seems that the first few pages of 97- to 100-point wines are all north of \$200—and only available to the mailing list! So, for the average wine drinker (or even the above-average one), where does one look if you want to explore Napa Cab? Well, I'd suggest to you that while there isn't much left from Napa under \$25, the \$30 to \$75 category is positively packed with world-class wines. I'm in the very privileged position of getting to taste many of the top wines of the region every year, and I can honestly say that if you choose carefully, it's possible to drink top-notch Napa Cab that rivals the biggest cult names in terms of quality, and still for under \$50 a bottle.

2015 Buehler "Estate" Napa Valley Cabernet

Sauvignon (\$29.95) This is the *estate* bottling, not to be confused with the (also delicious) *Napa Valley* bottling with a *very* similar label. Here, you're getting another level of concentration, power, and structure. It's selected from hillside blocks, and designed to last 15-plus years, and yes—it's under \$30. **93 VN**

2016 Band of Vintners "Consortium" Napa Valley

Cabernet Sauvignon (\$29.95) A new vintage of a wine that continues to wow me. A project that draws on the collective skill set of a few highly regarded vintners in Napa, including Larkmead's Dan Petroski. There is a ton of quality fruit packed into this inexpensive bottling and it really shows the classiness of the 2016 vintage. One of the very best values out there.

2015 C. Beck "Barlow Vineyard" Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon

(\$49.95) A little project previously unknown to me, but a seriously impressive wine. Sourced from Barlow's vineyard at the foot of Howell Mountain, this is a masterpiece of balance and poise. There is deep, black fruit, graphite, scorched earth, but also finer, lifted elements of sandalwood, crushed flowers, and lavender. Beautiful wine in a very classic yet powerful style.



2015 Martin Ray "Synthesis" Napa Valley Cabernet

Sauvignon (\$49.95) Top barrel selections from Martin Ray, artfully blended. Fruit is from Rutherford and Stags Leap. This wine exquisitely captures the power of Napa Cab, with deep, loamy earth underpinning the exotic, ripe fruit. A bold, rich wine, but one that never loses its balance or sense of place.

2016 Purlieu "Le Pich" Napa Valley Cabernet

Sauvignon (\$49.99) Winemaker Julien Fayard's resume includes: Château Lafite, Smith Haut Lafitte, Dalle Valle, Lail, and Quintessa. This is a full-throttle, hedonistic Cab. It's a big wine, but all the elements are pulling in the same direction and it makes for quite a compelling wine. People pay *big money* for wines that taste like this—and Fayard has the formula. **94+ RP**



2015 Farella Coombsville Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$64.95)

Probably my favorite Napa Cab of the year so far. Inky black and blue fruit. A perfectly struck balance of power and precision combining the richness and concentration of Napa Valley with the freshness, structure, and length of great Paulliac. A highly aromatic wine with crushed violets, blackcurrant, blueberry, cassis, pencil shavings, graphite, and sandalwood. Incredible length on the palate. **95 VN, 94 WS, 93 JS**

2015 Zeitgeist Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon

(\$74.99) Let's look at the facts here. This wine comes from three of the very finest Cabernet sites in Napa: Sleeping Lady, Lewelling, and Farella! It's made by ex-Spottswode winemaker, Jen Williams. This wine seriously blows so many, much more expensive wines, out of the water. **94+ JD, 93 JS**

2015 Keever "Inspirado" Napa Valley Cabernet

Sauvignon (\$74.95) Made by cult winemaker Celia Welch of Scarecrow fame. A big, powerful Cab blend with huge concentration but without losing varietal character, this shows hints of shaved cedar and cigar box. Classic Napa Valley loamy red earth adds a nice complex, savory component to the mélange of deep red fruits. This is top-notch stuff!



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