

Best wines of the year

A couple of years ago, wine commentators and the cognoscenti were pretty much in agreement that the 1990s had delivered the finest wines ever produced in California. A succession of vintages, while distinguishable in terms of individual growing-season circumstances and crop yields, delivered impressive wines across the board. Indeed, the praise heaped upon the wines of the spectacular 1997 vintage — particularly the reds — gave the impression that the decade's success story had reached a level that was unlikely to be bettered, given that only two vintages were left to complete the ten-year span.

The quieter release of the 1998 reds last year fixed that notion in the minds of many. The vintage had been deemed "challenging" in the terminology of vintners who knew that selling the wine in the face of disparagement from influential critics would be a formidable task. As a result, the 1997s were looking better than ever. Alas, poor, maligned 1998 never recovered from the initial attack. Savvy shoppers picked off the few absolute gems and the balance of the vintage languished on retailers' shelves.

Rather than slinking into the marketplace, the 1999 Cabs, Merlots and proprietary reds swaggered onto retail shelves this year. They are glorious wines, every bit as good as the reds from heralded 1997, albeit in different ways. "Both vintages offer opulent fruit," observes Tim Mondavi, managing director and winegrower at Robert Mondavi Winery. "But in 1997, the wines have ripe, powerful tannins, while the Cabernets of the 1999 vintage tend to show more roundness of texture and less powerful tannins."

Unlike El Niño-dominated 1998, which saw heavy precipitation extending into bloom, 1999 was a La Niña year — relatively dry and marked by a cold winter that damaged the state's citrus crop and ordained a low yield for wine grapes. But a cool spring was followed by a pleasantly mild summer that slowed grape ripening, allowing for the lengthy "hang time" vintners desire. By September, a well-timed heat wave brought grape sugars into sync with their acidity.

When all the reports were in, the 1999 harvest yielded more quantity than anticipated, with 2.6 million tons of wine grapes crushed statewide. The numbers were up three percent from 1998 and slightly exceed the five-year average of 2.4 million tons. Newly bearing acreage made up for crop reductions attributable to Mother Nature.

Vintage 2000 was also a mostly cool year with an extended growing season, but yield was way up, a record high of 3.3 million tons, due to even more vineyard acres coming into production for the first time. The 2000 reds released in 2002, mostly Pinots, Zins and Syrahs, are variable in quality due to mid-June heat spikes with 110° temperatures in some North Coast vineyards, particularly Napa Valley. A superstar was Kent Rosenblum, whose 18 vineyard-designated 2000 Zinfandels comprised the most remarkable portfolio of same-varietal wines I've ever encountered from one winery in a single vintage. Every one a winner, and five of them outstanding.

Wine growers reported that vintage 2001, currently represented on the shelves primarily by its white wines, was excellent for all varietals, although the 3.1 million-ton yield was down six percent from the 2000 record in spite of more than 40,000 new acres bearing fruit. Sauvignon Blancs from 2000 and especially 2001 are distinguished by their exceptional quality. Ranking them by personal preference was the most difficult task I tackled for this report. The list could be twice as long, and the rankings easily interchangeable. >

Stirling, 1999 Three Palms Vineyard, Napa Valley
— \$55 (6,000 cases)

Whitehall Lane, 1999 Napa Valley
— \$26 (11,500 cases)

Best Value Merlots

1. Carmenet, 2000 Dynamite Vineyards, North Coast — \$18 (Best Value Merlot of the Year): Round, velvety and full flavored, offering ripe cherry fruit, subtle dried herbs and a meaty note. The flavors mirror the nose and also exhibit hints of chocolate and coffee. (37,000 cases)

2. J. Lohr, 1999 Los Osos, Paso Robles — \$15: Inviting aromas of raspberry, red currant, blackberry, mocha and brown sugar. Concentrated, luscious flavors of red fruits enhanced by vanilla and smoky, oak toast with medium tannins. (24,000 cases)

Beringer, 1999 Founders' Estate, California
— \$12 (150,000 cases)

Bonterra, 1999 Mendocino County
— \$16 (10,000 cases)

Canyon Road, 2000 California — \$10 (108,000 cases)
Crystal Valley Cellars, 2000 California
— \$16 (1,950 cases)

Echelon, 2000 Central Coast — \$12 (40,000 cases)
Frei Brothers, 1999 Sonoma County
— \$15 (10,900 cases)

Pepperwood Grove, 2000 California
— \$9 (20,000 cases)

Pinot Noir

1. Champion, 2000 Santa Lucia Highlands — \$33 (Pinot Noir of the Year): This is the premier release from Larry Brooks under his own label. The longtime Acacia winemaker and Pinot Noir specialist sourced his fruit entirely from the Paraiso Springs Vineyard in the southern end of the appellation. This elegant Pinot offers aromatic scents of freshly crushed strawberry, black cherry and star anise. Rich, silky-smooth and seamless, the palate echoes the nose and is deep and layered. The epitome of delicacy and finesse. (1,100 cases)

2. Byron, 1999 Nielson Vineyard, Santa Maria Valley — \$45: Intense, opulent aromas of ripe strawberry, cherry, blackberry and plum enhanced by toasted almond and vanilla. A richly textured and luxuriant Pinot with medium tannins and refreshing acidity that offers remarkably extracted, berry-like flavors nuanced with nutmeg, clove and tea. (1,633 cases)

3. Patz & Hall, 2000 Russian River Valley — \$33: Scents of medium-charred oak mingle with ripe cherry and raspberry, some gaminess, sandalwood and shy green herbs. Velvety, rich and luscious with deep strawberry-black cherry fruit and warm spice. This nicely extracted Pinot lingers on the palate and shows a hint of green herbs in the finish. (2,300 cases)

supple and elegant in the mouth with a silky texture and deep, concentrated flavors of sweet, ripe raspberry, cherry and cinnamon-clove spice. Medium tannins and lingering aftertaste in the generous, creamy finish. (1,006 cases)

Truchard, 2000

Carneros — \$32: Vibrant nose of exotic spices, smoky plum, cranberry and wild strawberry enhanced by pleasant earthy, leathery notes. Rich and silky on the palate with medium tannins and impressively deep flavors of ripe cherry, black plum, vanilla and spice. (2,979 cases)

Sanford, 2000 La Rinconada Vineyard "Barrel Select," Santa Barbara County — \$50: Aromatic, upfront scents of red cherry and raspberry mingle with leather, anise and a hint of smoke. Generous in the mouth offering a wonderfully pure expression of sweet red fruits accented by subtle spice and mineral notes; medium tannins and a smooth, plush texture. (1,300 cases)

Acacia, 2000 Carneros — \$25 (20,367 cases)

Babcock, 2000 Grand Cuvée, Santa Ynez Valley — \$35 (1,000 cases)

Baileyana, 1999 Edna Valley
— \$23 (2,226 cases)

Chalone Vineyard, 2000 Chalone
— \$30 (9,629 cases)

De Loach, 2000 O.F.S. Estate, Russian River Valley
— \$40 (2,850 cases)

Edmeades, 1999 Anderson Valley — \$20 (1,670 cases)
La Crema, 2000 Russian River Valley
— \$35 (1,029 cases)

Merry Edwards, 2000 Russian River Valley
— \$32 (3,200 cases)

Etude, 2000 Carneros — \$40 (6,000 cases)

Floodgate, 2000 Anderson Valley — \$30 (1,800 cases)

Kendall-Jackson, 1999 Great Estates, Monterey County — \$30 (2,180 cases)

Melville, 2000 Estate, Santa Rita Hills
— \$24 (1,950 cases)

Miner Family, 2000 Garys' Vineyard, Santa Lucia Highlands — \$50 (1,100 cases)

(Best Value Pinot of the Year): Vibrant aromas of sweet cherry and red plum and vanilla. Velvety smooth and moderately concentrated with youthful flavors of cherry and plum accented by shy, dried herb sandalwood spice. (3,930 cases)

2. Chateau

Jean, 2000 Santa Lucia Highlands, Santa Lucia Highlands — \$35: Intensely fragrant nose of rose petals, Bing cherry, blackberry, cranberry, clove and toasty oak. On the palate with medium tannins and a medium-full body offering luxurious flavors of dark cherry and blackberry, mocha, mild leather and a hint of leather. (9,000 cases)

Beaulieu, 2000 Carneros — \$25 (17,000 cases)

Beringer, 2000 Founders' Estate, California — \$12 (20,000 cases)
Fetzer, 2000 Five Rivers Ranch, Santa Maria Valley — \$13 (14,000 cases)

Frei Brothers, 1999 Russian River Valley
— \$18 (10,890 cases)

Pepperwood Grove, 2000 California
— \$9 (12,000 cases)

Syrachs & Petites

1. Shafer, 1999 Relentless, Napa Valley — \$46 (Syrah of the Year): Shafer's first Syrah, named in tribute to Winemaker Elias Fernandez's relentless pursuit of quality, is every bit as impressive as the winery's flagship Hillside Select Cabernet. Intensely fragrant nose of very ripe blackberry and cassis followed by almost liqueur-like concentration, dried lavender, anise and toasty oak. Richly upholstered with broad shoulders cloaked in a velvety robe of texture, the wine delivers a great burst of incredibly concentrated, multi-layered and expansive flavors of blackberry, black cherry and blueberry enhanced by vanilla, black pepper and dried sage. Blended with 20 percent petite sirah, this is a bold, generous, deeply flavored wine with medium-full tannins. (1,900 cases) >

