

CHAMPAGNE FOR THE HOLIDAYS } BAROLO BY COMMUNE

# Wine & Spirits

YEAR'S BEST

## CABERNETS

+97 BEST BUYS



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# YEAR'S BEST US CABERNETS & BLENDS

Our blind panels tasted **648** new-release cabernet-based wines over the past 12 months. **Joshua Greene**, our critic for northern California, and **Patrick J. Comiskey**, our critic for California's Central Coast, Oregon and Washington, rated **255** as exceptional (90+) and **100** as Best Buys. Find a complete list of wines tasted and all reviews at [wineandspiritsmagazine.com](http://wineandspiritsmagazine.com).

## CALIFORNIA

### NAPA VALLEY

**96 | Heitz** \$250  
**2015 Napa Valley Martha's Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon** Extended bottle age at Heitz's cellar is a long-term investment in a wine like this 2015 Martha's Vineyard. Mysteriously, the wine manages to be plump and austere at once, like an aristocrat who's a little soft in the middle but tough as nails. The vintage has the eucalyptus scent that famously marks this vineyard's cabernet, a complex element in the midst of the wine's fresh, bright red fruit and silken texture. Seriously grand Napa Valley cabernet, bristling with energy, this has a long life ahead. —J.G. (W&S 10/20; 2,500 cases)

**96 | Long Meadow Ranch** \$135  
**2015 Napa Valley E.J. Church Cabernet Sauvignon** Long Meadow's vineyard in the Mayacamas hills above Rutherford was originally planted by E.J. Church in the 1870s; since 1989, it has been the home of Ted and Laddie Hall, who have since planted 16 acres of organically farmed vines (CCOF certified). Their cabernet, made by Ashley Heisey, is a dynamic wine in 2015, right from the intoxicating floral spice, notes of cedar and thyme drawing you in to the generous taste of fruit on the verge of ripeness, then pulling you back with an undertow of savory tannins, a quiet umami explosion of dark mushrooms and mountain rock. Vinous rather than overtly fruity, this sustains some of the vegetal aspects of cabernet in its flavors while the tannins feel completely ripe—reversing the contemporary Napa Valley paradigm. This is a luscious, deliciously clean red that will live and evolve for years. —J.G.

**95 | Duckhorn** \$100  
**2016 Napa Valley Three Palms Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon** When Dan and Margaret Duckhorn released their first wines, the 1978s included a vineyard-designate from Three Palms. The vineyard became part of Duckhorn's identity and, since 2015, the 73 acres of rocky, volcanic soils on the valley floor between St. Helena and Calistoga

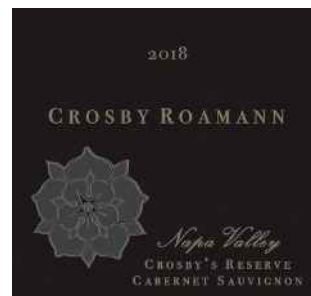
are now part of Duckhorn's estate. If you're a longtime Duckhorn fan, you won't be disappointed by the richness and power of this 2016. It's ripe and substantial, with a soulful mineral complexity to the chocolate depths of its tannins. And if you tend to gravitate toward cooler wines from high altitudes in the Mayacamas, you might share my fascination with the cool, brisk feel of this wine, particularly in the context of that volcanic intensity. It's the kind of contradiction I've come to expect in the best wines from Renee Ary, winemaker at Duckhorn—the kind that lends tension and energy to what, on its own, would be rich valley-floor fruit. This is not a lean, high-acid cabernet; it's a friendly, welcoming red with freshness amplifying its magnitude, keeping the wine buoyant and delicious. —J.G. (W&S 6/20; 800 cases)

**95 | Stag's Leap Wine Cellars** \$295  
**2017 Napa Valley Cask 23 Cabernet Sauvignon** On the spring day our panel tasted this wine, sitting outdoors, the breeze picked up as we approached this glass, and it seemed to cool down its intense concentration. As it turned out, that cool concentration stayed with the wine for days after opening the bottle, a structural component giving this the clarity and lively power of an epic Cask 23 vintage. Marcus Notaro finalized the blend at 52 percent from S.L.V. and 48 percent from Fay and aged it almost two years in new French oak barrels. The tannins are rich, the aroma smoky, but the bright liveliness of the fruit—the persimmon, the cherry and the fresh cigar tobacco—are the elements that shine through. Youthful and unevolved, this wine is an investment in the future, with patient cellaring required. —J.G. (W&S 10/20; 2,500 cases)

**95 | Stag's Leap Wine Cellars** \$150  
**2017 Napa Valley Fay Cabernet Sauvignon** As Stag's Leap Wine Cellars sets out to celebrate its 50th anniversary, this vintage of Fay cabernet may be the best wine I've tasted from that historic vineyard—the site and the wine that initially convinced Warren Winiarski to purchase the rocky hillside next to Nathan Fay's vineyard. The soils at Fay are

alluvial, remnants of an ancient riverbed, unlike the rock that eroded off the Stags Leap Escarpment and collected at the base of the hill at S.L.V., Winiarski's original vineyard. In 2017, Fay is the elegant beauty. There's nothing pushy or potent about its complexity, just a waterfall of minerals and fruits that seems to continue long after each taste. It would be hard not to fall in love with this wine's svelte refinement. Open a bottle and let it lift your mood. —J.G. (W&S 10/20; 3,140 cases)

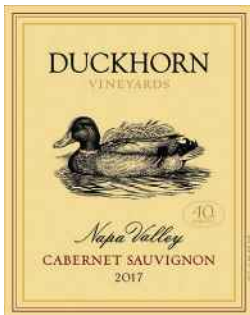
**94 | Beringer** \$400  
**2016 Napa Valley Eighth Maker Cabernet Sauvignon** Jacob and Frederick Beringer left Mainz, Germany, for California in 1869. They purchased 215 acres on the west side of St. Helena and built a stone winery on the site in 1877. Jacob's great-great-grandson, Mark Beringer, took over as winemaker there in 2015, the eighth since the company's founding, occasioning the release of this new wine. While the tannins are ripe and subtle in their earthy power, this wine goes deep into plummy flavor (back in the day, Napa Valley's cash crop was prune plums). It has the richness of freshly turned soil, grounding a huge wine so that it feels graceful. There's nothing Porty or overripe about it; the wine is just living large. —J.G.



**94 | Crosby Roamann** \$90  
**2018 Napa Valley Crosby's Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon** With a winery based in a converted warehouse in the city of Napa, Sean McBride could consider Coombsville his backyard. The vineyard district in the hills east of town has become a coveted source of fruit due to its long growing season, slowed by the cool bay to the south. McBride focused this cabernet on fruit from

Coombsville's Harmony School Vineyard, with additional cabernet and merlot from a vineyard in Calistoga. It's an elegant red, with the cedar scent of a tobacconist's shop. While the wine is completely savory, it's also supple, filled with luscious dark-berry flavors and a sensation of cocoa dusting the tannins. McBride allows his destemmed fruit to spontaneously ferment in oak barrels and, after aging, bottles it without fining or filtering; the wine feels like a live connection to its source in the Coombsville hills. — J.G.

**94 | Duckhorn** \$100  
**2017 Napa Valley Three Palms Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon** While Three Palms has historically been tied to its legendary merlot, the rocky vineyard on Calistoga's valley floor also has provided some exceptional cabernets, particularly since 2015, when Duckhorn added the vineyard to its estate. This is a pretty glorious 2017, open and racy, a wine with length and finesse to its violet and blueberry scents. Tannins structure the wine while feeling completely integrated into the fruit, suggesting a long life ahead. — J.G.

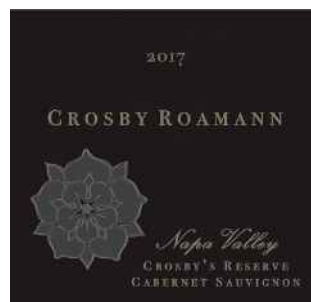


**94 | Duckhorn** \$78  
**2017 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon** This is a Napa Valley cabernet that does everything right. Renee Ary blends fruit from Duckhorn's estate with grapes from growers, including 12 percent merlot to point up the luscious texture; she ages the wine for 16 months in French oak barrels (half of them new), without it becoming overtly oaky. It's a wine of elegance and restraint, delicious in its sweet purple-plum intensity, succulent in its earthy tannins. Those mineral tannins retreat into the finish, allowing the savory fruit to move in. Accessible now, this will only improve with a few years in bottle. — J.G. (W&S 10/20)

**94 | Joseph Phelps** \$300  
**2017 Napa Valley Insignia** Ashley Hepworth blended the 2017 Insignia, working with cabernet sauvignon (94 percent) from the family's estate vineyards (mostly Las

Rocas and Barboza in the Stags Leap District, with smaller contributions from south Napa, Oak Knoll and St. Helena). It's a significantly tighter selection than usual, given heat spikes and then the fires at the end of the vintage, but the top fruit of 2017 produced an extraordinary wine, one that maintains its cool for days after you first open the bottle. It's dynamic and graceful, with floral red fruit and dense blueberry-skin tannins that give the wine length and staying power. Whitney Asher of *Brava* in Lenox, Mass., described the wine as "bionic: It will last in your cellar for thirty years. You want to age it at least five years, or decant it for five hours." — J.G.

**94 | Yao Ming** \$695  
**2017 Napa Valley The Chop Cabernet Sauvignon** Tom Hinde makes this wine from the Morisoli Vineyard on the western benchlands of Rutherford along Neibaum Lane; he blends in some fruit from the Pestoni family's vineyard on Bella Oaks Lane, giving the wine two years in new Vallaurine oak barrels from staves aged by Dargaud & Jaeglé. Both generous and elegant, this cabernet buzzes with energy and sweet ripeness, initially cut by a saline savor. The savory side takes precedence with air, the flavors turning toward oyster mushrooms and rosemary, the tannins taking on Rutherford's bitter cocoa notes. The flavor complexity seems to last for minutes after each sip. — J.G.



**93 | Crosby Roamann** \$90  
**2017 Napa Valley Crosby's Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon** This is a Coombsville cabernet, harvested from the Harmony School Vineyard in early October and blended with some Calistoga merlot picked a month earlier, when a heat spike propelled it to ripeness. The wine's muscle builds out of mineral-rich tannins, their astringency dynamic rather than blunt, working with powerful grace to shepherd the dark savor of the fruit. Notes of green plum, tobacco and *fines herbes* tame the lusciousness of that fruit, making the wine accessible now. — J.G.

**93 | Duckhorn** \$100  
**2017 Napa Valley Rector Creek Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon** Duckhorn's Rector Creek Vineyard lies just above Yountville, on the west side of the Silverado Trail. Its rocky, alluvial soils grew a brisk cabernet in 2017, vibrant in the clarity of its flavors of black-cherry skins and its mouthwatering tannins. A wine with a healthy, untroubled sense of grace, it's a smooth, ripe cabernet holding some tension that will see it through several years of bottle age. — J.G.

**93 | Duckhorn** \$100  
**2017 Napa Valley Patzimaro Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon** Duckhorn farms 15 acres on the St. Helena bench where it meets Spring Mountain, a vineyard the company purchased in 1989. The clay-loam soils produced a plump and plummy wine in 2017, its earthy tannins brightened by scents of strawberries and roses. It finishes completely dry, both sophisticated and clean, a wine to pour with country pâté or a hanger steak. — J.G.

**93 | Stag's Leap Wine Cellars** \$195  
**2017 Napa Valley S.L.V. Cabernet Sauvignon** The rocky hillside soils of S.L.V. produced a dark and savory cabernet in 2017, with peppery intensity that feels driven by alcohol at first. Then, as it settles and integrates, the alcohol becomes part of the dynamic whole, layered into the tannins to highlight their dark-chocolate succulence. It's generous with blackberry fruit that still carries its youthful grapiness, structured to age and evolve over the next ten years. — J.G. (W&S 10/20; 2,096 cases)

**92 | Cakebread** \$129  
**2017 Napa Valley Benchland Select Cabernet Sauvignon** Stephanie Jacobs focused this wine on two vineyards in the western benchlands of Oakville and Rutherford. It's a bold splash of cool cherry and sour-plum flavors, the ripeness balanced with freshness, so that, even as a big, full cabernet, the wine retains its shape. You could drink it now with filet mignon, or cellar it for a more complex pleasure several years from now. — J.G.

**92 | Covenant** \$150  
**2017 Napa Valley Solomon Lot 70 Cabernet Sauvignon** Founded by Jeff Morgan and Leslie Rudd, Covenant makes kosher wines that are not mevushal (heated). And whether or not you are looking for kosher wine, this Napa Valley cabernet is worth seeking out. Jonathan Hajdu made it from the best parcels he worked with in 2017, including Rudd's

vineyards in Mount Veeder (60 percent) and Oakville (20 percent); the rest came from the Giuliani Vineyard in Yountville. Working at the winery in Berkeley, he allows the wine to ferment spontaneously, ages it for 18 months in French oak (75 percent new), and bottles it without fining or filtering. The wine's vibrant purple-plum sweetness is immediately appealing, as is the textural purity, not so much smooth as it is complete and sleek. —J.G.

**92 | Essere Franco** \$65

**2016 Napa Valley Essere Mi** A spicy, Italianate blend of cabernet sauvignon, petit verdot and malbec, this edges its flavors of black cherries and sun-dried tomatoes in notes of balsam, rosemary and hibiscus. Its high-toned fruit would take on pork short ribs, marinated and grilled. —J.G.

**92 | Essere Franco** \$150

**2016 Napa Valley Winemaker's Blend Number 1** Fragrant, with blueberry-skin density, floral notes and gingery spice, this wine blends cabernet sauvignon, malbec and petit verdot into the rich savor of unsweetened dark chocolate. The warmth of alcohol drives its intensity, built for long-braised beef. —J.G.

**92 | Etude** \$90

**2016 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon** More about moonlight than sunlight, this wine has cool bass notes of tannins under dark shades of mushrooms, carrot tops and black-fruit intensity. It's earthy, savory and bold, a wine for roast wild boar. —J.G.

**92 | Heitz** \$125

**2014 Napa Valley Trailside Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon** From an organically farmed estate vineyard in eastern Rutherford, between the Silverado Trail and Conn Creek, this is a complex and mature cabernet ready to drink on release. The tight structure marries gentle tannins and kirsch-like cherry fruit while the secondary aromas of cigar tobacco and roses last long into the finish. It's a refined style, with enough luscious fruit to keep it firmly rooted in Napa Valley. —J.G. (W&S 10/20; 2,500 cases)

**92 | Seven Apart** \$135

**2018 Napa Valley Expedition Cabernet Sauvignon** Andy Erickson makes this wine from the Stags Ridge Vineyard, rising to an elevation of 1,400 feet on Atlas Peak. He blended in fruit from the project's Base Camp Vineyard, planted adjacent to the winery on the Silverado Trail at Soda Mountain

Road. This first release of Expedition combines power and grace in a generous cabernet, lasting on the transparent depths of cherry skins and pomegranate seeds. The tannins follow a darker line, with black plum and smoky intensity marrying the fruit with a perk of volatility from its time in oak. The wine is available to members who join the mailing list on the company's website. —J.G.

**92 | Silverado** \$56

**2017 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon** This estate-grown cabernet focuses on Silverado's vineyards in the Stags Leap District and Coombsville, the SLD portion contributing to the wine's blueberry-and-espresso richness, refreshed by cooler cherry notes from Mt. George to the south. It seems simple at first, before the wine's tannic density begins to open with air, its floral detail more apparent. —J.G. (W&S 10/20)



**92 | William Hill** \$75

**2016 Napa Valley The Notch Winemaker's Series** This wine features merlot (60 percent) in a blend with cabernet sauvignon (28 percent), franc and malbec. The flavors are rich and savory, at the intersection of black currant and pure anise spice. The savor takes it toward carrot tops and woodland mushrooms, as if it's focused on dinner, perhaps thinly sliced flank steak over caramelized root vegetables. —J.G.

**92 | Yao Ming** \$258

**2017 Napa Valley Family Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon** As massive as this wine may be when first poured, it immediately shows its lively flavor details. And those details keep flowing out of a fountain of purple-plum fruit, touching on green olives, bitter flower petals and vibrant blueberry notes. Justin Leprevost of *Brava* in Lenox, Mass., compared it to "almost-falling-apart blueberries as you're mixing in the sugar for jam." Another panelist described the fruit as fresh and alive. "The wine tastes expensive," he said, "in a getting-what-you-paid-for way." —J.G.

**91 | Beaulieu** \$65

**2017 Napa Valley Tapestry Reserve** Tapestry focuses on cabernet sauvignon while bringing in four other Bordelais varieties. In 2017, it's heady and concentrated, layering ripe fruit flavors that range from sour cherries to deep-toned blueberries. There's a hint of smoky persimmon to highlight the wine's massive build. —J.G.

**91 | Beringer** \$170

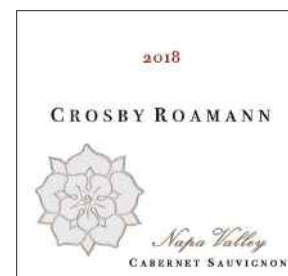
**2017 Napa Valley Private Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon** An elegant vintage of Private Reserve, this is nearly two-thirds from Howell Mountain, specifically the iron-rich red soils of Steinhauer Ranch and the white volcanic tuff of Bancroft; another quarter of the blend comes from St. Helena (Beringer's Home Vineyard and Chabot). The wine is tight and green at first, needing air to gain and lengthen its fruit scents of black cherries and blackberry seeds. Tense and floral, with subdued ripeness, this should age well. —J.G.

**91 | Beringer** \$50

**2017 Napa Valley Distinctions Cabernet Sauvignon (Best Buy)** From a range of vineyards up and down the Napa Valley, this wine starts off floral, vibrant, warm and prickly in its blackberry and blueberry notes. Then, with air, the elements come together, opening like a rose, bright and rich. Give this a year in the cellar or a few hours in a decanter, then serve it with Provençal lamb. —J.G.

**91 | Cornerstone** \$75

**2016 Napa Valley Benchlands Cabernet Sauvignon** Scents of violets and blueberries rise off this wine's rich fruit. It's silken and ripe, the cocoa-like tannins parting in the finish to let the fruit shine. This is dark and saturated, ready for roast duck. —J.G.



**91 | Crosby Roamann** \$60

**2018 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon** Austere with bright red-currant flavors and ironlike tannins, this wine shows some youthful reduction in its tight green notes. It's a mineral take on cabernet, needing some cellar time to mellow and integrate. —J.G.