



VALUE JUDGMENT Why is it so hard to find a good Cabernet at a decent price?



By
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TWO YEARS AGO I wrote a column describing my search for good Pinot Noirs under \$20 a bottle. It wasn't easy: Pinot Noir is a notoriously fickle grape, requiring just the right conditions to thrive, and the wines are both more difficult and more expensive to produce. Cabernet Sauvignon is a much easier, hardier grape. And yet, as I discovered in reporting this column, finding good, reasonably priced Cabernet can be just as hard, perhaps even harder.

Native to Bordeaux, France, Cabernet Sauvignon is one of the world's most popular and most commonly planted grapes. It's found just about anywhere winemakers are looking to make their mark—or lots of money—and produces both lofty and lousy wines. The former are made from grapes grown in great sites and carefully tended vineyards, fermented and aged in expensive French oak. The latter come from high-yielding vineyards, machine-harvested grapes fermented with oak chips and worse.

Mega Purple, for instance, is one of many additives that makers of commercial brands use to make the wine appear dark and suave and help mask green or herbaceous aromas of underripe grapes. But I wasn't interested in featuring wines made from a confected combo of oak chips and sugar but, rather, from grapes grown to physiological ripeness, unmasked by excess oak. That eliminated the majority of the most popular Cab brands on the market today.

Cabernet Sauvignon grapes produce both lofty and lousy wines.

I started my search with an upper price limit of \$20 a bottle but soon increased it to \$25 when the pickings proved slim. I bought 17 bottles from various wine regions in California and Washington State as well as Australia, Argentina, Chile and even one wine from South Africa. Sadly, this example, the 2017 Stark-Condé Cabernet Sauvignon from the Stellenbosch region (*\$17*), proved a disincentive to further South African Cabernet research.

Four Chilean Cabernets proved even more disappointing. I remember when Chilean Cabernets were pretty good, or at least not as aggressively herbaceous and weedy as the wines I bought. The 2017 Lapostolle Cuvée Alexandre Cabernet Sauvignon (*\$20*) had an aromatic overlay of tobacco and dill. The 2017 Los Vascos Grande Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon (*\$12*) and 2016 Montes Alpha Cabernet Sauvignon (*\$19*) were equally stemmy and green.

I found a couple of pretty good wines from California, including the slightly tannic 2017 St. Francis Sonoma County Cabernet Sauvignon (*\$20*), marked by attractive red and dark fruits; the 2017 Louis M. Martini Sonoma County Cabernet Sauvignon (*\$17*) had soft tannins and notes of cocoa and red fruit. Even more happily, I found five Cabernets that truly impressed me, three from California and two from Australia.

These were wines of true varietal character, lively acidity and fruit unsmothered by oak; save one, they were relatively low in alcohol, too. The 2017 Aarena Red Hills Lake County Cabernet Sauvignon (*\$25*) was a lush, powerful wine so well balanced its 14.5% alcohol didn't seem over the top—perhaps because it's made by superstar winemaking consultant Aaron Pott, a Cabernet whiz. Mr. Pott turns out Cabernets that cost as much as \$215 a bottle for his Napa clients. How did he end up making a wine affordable to all?

Mr. Pott told me he decided to make this wine after seeing the Red Hills Vineyard in Lake County. "I went up Christmas 2014, and I thought it was absolutely gorgeous: super iron-rich soil dotted with obsidian," he recalled. Mr. Pott partnered with the owners of Blackbird Vineyards in Napa on the Lake County project. "It's a fun project for us, and it's a real challenge to make a good wine in that category," he said.

Another well-regarded Napa-based winemaker, Tony Coltrin, produced one of my favorite wines, the 2018 Oberon Napa County Cabernet Sauvignon (*\$20*). Mr. Coltrin has made many expensive wines, notably with the late Robert Mondavi. Unfortunately, he said, their price meant they weren't attainable for many drinkers. With Oberon he reaches a much wider audience: "The point is to create, in the words of Bob Mondavi, a beverage that can be shared by family and friends."

Napa-based Jonathan Pey was in the wine business for decades before he and his late wife, Susan, founded Textbook wines in 2004. The fruit for his excellent 2018 Textbook Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (*\$25*), a lush, lively red, came from a variety of connections. "Some of the grapes were purchased with a contract, some with a handshake contract," he said. When I noted the wine's lithe character and relatively low alcohol (under 14%), Mr. Pey said, "I tend to ask growers to carry a little more canopy to give the grapes more shade. I'm typically picking earlier than my neighbors, too."

The cool climate of the Margaret River region of Western Australia helped keep down the alcohol level of my other two favorite Cabernets, according to their winemakers: the 2018 Ringbolt Margaret River Cabernet Sauvignon (*\$17*) and 2017 Vasse Felix Margaret River Filius Cabernet Sauvignon (*\$20*), 14% and 14.1% alcohol respectively.

Heather Fraser, winemaker at Ringbolt, noted that her wines retain their acidity and tannin structure with very little intervention. She also uses very little new oak (6% for the 2018 vintage). As a result the Ringbolt Cabernet is juicy and fresh, bursting with red and dark fruit.

The 2017 Vasse Felix Filius is a bit more restrained, more structured and tannic, but equally good. "We don't use heavy new oak so as not to mask the purity of our fine Cabernet fruit. Our wine is aged in older oak for 12-15 months to ensure the wine breathes and tannins moderate," said Vasse Felix winemaker Virginia Willcock. "All our Cabernet is organically grown and made with minimal intervention."

Conditions in Margaret River are clearly suited to Cabernet, and the grape's low cost of production means good wines can be sold for reasonable prices. If only there were more Margaret River Cabernets in the U.S. market, my search might have been easier, but they

are still fairly scarce stateside. Only 1,000 cases of that 2018 Ringbolt Cabernet were sent to the U.S. “Hopefully the United States is a growing market for us,” Ms. Fraser wrote.

After tasting 17 Cabernets, of which only five or six were wines I’d want to drink again, I think that while Cabernet may be one of the world’s greatest grapes, it’s not necessarily always treated as such.

OENOFILE / CHEAPISH CABERNET



1. 2018 Textbook Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon, \$25

Produced from a variety of Napa fruit sources—15 different vineyard lots, to be exact—this elegant wine is marked by notes of dark red fruit and spice. At 13.3% alcohol, it’s also a very versatile and lively drink.

2. 2017 AERENA Red Hills Lake County Cabernet Sauvignon, \$25

Superstar Napa-based winemaking consultant Aaron Pott fell in love with the Red Hills Vineyard in Lake County, the source of this plush-textured, full-bodied yet well-balanced wine.

3. 2018 Oberon Napa County Cabernet Sauvignon, \$20

Winemaker Tony Coltrin has made plenty of small-production, high-priced Napa Cabs in his long career—as well as wines like this soft-textured, easy-drinking Oberon, just as rewarding and more reasonably priced.

4. 2018 Ringbolt Margaret River Cabernet Sauvignon, \$17

The cassis and cherry fruit burst out of this lively Cabernet from the Margaret River region where winemaker Heather Fraser said, “the temperate maritime conditions allow for a nice, long, even ripening period.”

5. 2017 Vasse Felix Margaret River Filius Cabernet Sauvignon, \$20

Filius is the entry-level Cabernet from Vasse Felix, the founding wine estate in Margaret River, Australia. The wine is well structured with firm tannins and great purity of fruit, unmasked by excessive oak.