

Meet the Producers Working to Keep Napa Affordable

BY VIRGINIE BOONE



Photo by Erin & Courtney De Jauregui

Most of us are not millionaires, and we don't necessarily have unlimited funds to invest in our love of wine. Yet, there are certain types of wine, and regions that produce them, that seem to demand significant spending to enjoy their riches.

Cabernet Sauvignon from California's **Napa Valley** often falls into that category. The million-dollar question: Can you find great wine for a two-digit price tag from such an illustrious region?

The answer is yes—but it's all relative. For some, a \$75 wine is a once-in-a-lifetime buy, while for others, a \$30 bottle represents the same plateau.

In Napa Valley, moderately priced Cabernet Sauvignon is just hard to offer. Costs for land, farming and labor are high. Last year, the average price per ton of Napa Cabernet Sauvignon was \$7,925.47 (the state's average price per ton across all varieties was \$831.63).

One ton of grapes yields about two barrels, and each barrel fills about 25 cases, or 300 bottles, of wine. The economics are nuts.

Yet there are producers that make accessible, attainable Napa Cabs, and their efforts are worthy of support. Here, we highlight the wines that overdeliver and the winemakers who make them.



Left to right: Brittany Sherwood of Heitz Cellar; Dave Guffy of Hess Family Wine Estates; and Genevieve Janssens of Robert Mondavi Winery / Photo by Erin & Courtney De Jauregui

Old-School Roots

Heitz Cellar

Winemaker: Brittany Sherwood

Heitz was one of the Napa Valley's oldest family-owned wineries until 2018, when Gaylon Lawrence Jr. purchased the **St. Helena** business, complete with its more than 400 acres of vineyard and 40,000-case production.

Founded in 1961 by Joe Heitz, an industry legend, the winery became most famous for its **Martha's Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon**.

Through the decades, Heitz has always overdelivered. That includes Martha's, which, at just north of \$200, remains half the price of many of the cult wines that have come after it.

But it's the brand's nondesignated Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon that pleasantly surprises at a comparable bargain of \$63. Sherwood is committed to keeping Heitz wines as an affordable luxury.

"The goal is to have wines of high quality that are relatively affordable and accessible," says Sherwood. "It started with Joe Heitz, and the new ownership is trying to adhere to that, to make wine people can get their hands on."

Heitz owns its own fruit and farms everything organically.

That cost savings allows the Napa Valley Cab to enjoy two years in oak, while Heitz's single-vineyard Cabs age for three years. The Napa Valley Cab is Heitz's largest case production and the brand's most widely distributed selection.

"It's a starting point, it's how we build a following with new people," says Sherwood. "It's important to engage with new consumers, and price point is part of that."

Hess Family Wine Estates

Winemaker: Dave Guffy



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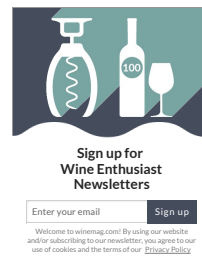
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Guffy is a big believer that if you control your land, you can control your destiny. So it comes as no surprise to find him working here, where many of the vineyards have been winery-owned for multiple decades, especially on **Mount Veeder**, where the winery is situated.

This May, that control was extended even more, when another 420-acre property was acquired. Called the Iron Corral Vineyard, it boasts 186 acres planted primarily to Cabernet Sauvignon, and is located in Pope Valley, a northeastern region of the Napa Valley popular with winemakers who know where to find value.

"One of Donald **Hess's** core values was to make wine accessible to the American people," says Guffy.

Iron Corral is expected to help grow Hess's **Lion Tamer** brand, which overdelivers relative to price. The new property is near to the winery's 205-acre Allomi Vineyard, which is the key to one of the winery's best values, the \$33 Allomi Cabernet Sauvignon.

"Every year, the grape crush report comes out, [and] I cringe and look at it with one eye closed," says Guffy, fearful of Napa's ever-escalating grape prices. "Every contract is tied to the average [price]. We chose to invest more in owning Napa Valley vineyards."

For the Allomi Cab, blending with **Petite Sirah**, **Petit Verdot** and **Malbec** helps bring those average prices down, as does a lean winery operation.

"It's about common sense, and we're always looking at better technology," he says. "It's easy to throw money at labor. We try to be smart about it."

Robert Mondavi Winery

Winemaker: Geneviève Janssens

Janssens feels lucky to work for a winery that **Robert Mondavi** founded. Almost everybody in the Napa Valley remains respectful of his vision and the relationships he has built with farmers over time. It's this respect that makes a \$36 Napa Valley Cabernet possible.

"You have to be careful to pick the right vineyards and people," says Janssens, the longtime winemaker.

A larger winery like Mondavi has a whole department of people to look after the company's vineyards. Still, it's up to Janssens to maintain style and quality at a high production level. It's all done in the hopes to produce a wine that's, as she puts it, "direct, fresh and easy to drink."

For the Napa Valley Cab, grapes come from Oakville and the winery's own **Wappo Hill Vineyard** in the **Stags Leap District**. To blend from the two sites is paramount, as is the addition of other varieties. Janssens adds **Cabernet Franc** for fragrance and silkiness, **Merlot** for softness and **Petit Verdot** for color and power. It's aged in French oak, though only 19% of it is new.

"The Napa Valley Cabernet is important to our philosophy of offering wine at every price point," she says. "This was very important to Mr. Mondavi."

Heitz 2014 Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley); \$63, 92 points. Representing one of the finest values in Napa Cabernet, this 100% varietal wine is bright and plush, layered in anise and cassis liqueur. A fresh high-toned midpalate evolves to show a softly round ending as a classic style of structure and elegance play out. **Editors' Choice.**

Hess 2016 Allomi Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley); \$33, 92 points. This blend is dominated by Cabernet Sauvignon, with smaller amounts of Petite Sirah, Malbec, Petit Verdot and Merlot. Bold black fruit expand on the palate, with a lengthy powder keg of tobacco, gun smoke and cigar box shining through. The tannins are persistent yet soft. **Editors' Choice.**

Robert Mondavi 2016 Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley); \$36, 87 points. With the addition of Petit Verdot, Merlot and Cabernet Franc, this is a soft, supple red wine, dusty in leather, clove and tobacco. It has full-bodied power and a substantial tannin presence.



Left to right, Peter Heitz of Turnbull, Molly Lyman of Volker Eisele Family Estate, and Aron Weinkauff of Spottswoode / Photo by Erin & Courtney De Jauregui

Traditional Family Affairs

Turnbull

Winemaker: Peter Heitz

Founded in 1979, this Oakville-based winery has been family owned since 1993 and remains entirely focused on estate-grown fruit. **Turnbull** owns four vineyards in the **Oakville** and **Calistoga** areas. Named Amoenus, Fortuna, Leopoldina and Turnbull Estate, they total more than 200 acres.

For Heitz, this is paramount to turn out exceptional wines at a fair price. Though he has no relation to Heitz Cellar, another prominent Napa Valley winery, his grandparents were friends with founders Joe and Alice Heitz and sold them grapes.

"The key is, ironically, our 100% estate status, which we self-farm," he says. "We're not overpaying for someone else's profit margin on their passion, location, people, equipment and risk."

But that's not all.

"Instead of paying for marble cellar floors, a guy that buffs the stainless-steel tanks until you can shave in the reflection, and crazy marketing consultants and campaigns, we just put honestly great wine in the bottle," says Heitz. "And since we're family owned, there aren't a bunch of corporate senior vice presidents of nothing to pull us down."

Ultimately, Turnbull keeps it simple. In Heitz's words, "our wines are fruit and French oak barrels only."

Volker Eisele Family Estate

Winemaker: Molly Lyman

Established in 1974 in the Chiles Valley District, **Volker Eisele** is named for the late founder, a committed land preservationist who has farmed organically from day one.

The property is now looked after by Volker's son, Alexander Eisele, as well as Lyman, who has previously made wine at **Paradigm Winery** and **Moone-Tsai Vineyards**.

"There's been a running joke at the winery for years that the Eisele fruit always shows up looking like bins of table grapes, the pick is so clean," says Lyman. "Alex doesn't hire seasonal picking crews, it's the same ranch crew who farms the vineyard throughout the year. They pick with such care and precision that once the fruit is on the sorting table, there's very little that needs to be pulled out."

Half of the six-person ranch crew are descendants of Jose Nevarez, who started work on the ranch in 1974.

"We have complete control from dirt to bottle," says Eisele. "Generations of the same family have been our vineyard crew for 45 years. We are efficient in the vineyard and have the luxury of history being able to hone our farming techniques as well as make adjustments, plus we farm organically. While labor costs are high, we do not have chemical or health-related expenses due to unsustainable practices."

The estate is home to 60 acres of vineyards, the majority of which are planted to Cabernet Sauvignon, but Lyman makes the wines at a production facility in Oakville. The family decided long ago to not build an onsite winery.

"We felt, and still feel, this was a sustainable choice we made with the intention to preserve the land and peaceful space where we live and farm," says Eisele. "Our customers benefit from this, since the cost of owning and operating a winery is not in the bottle price."

Spottswoode

Winemaker: Aron Weinkauff

Owned and operated by the Novak family since 1972, St. Helena-based **Spottswoode** produced its debut Cabernet Sauvignon in the early 1980s. In 1985, it became one of the first in the region to introduce organic farming practices.

Today, Spottswoode is admired for elegant and ageworthy estate-grown Cabernet Sauvignon as well as complex, savory **Sauvignon Blanc** from the Napa Valley. It also produces Lydenhurst, a wine that retails for \$85 and consistently outpaces more expensive competitors.

Weinkauff, the winemaker/vineyard manager, makes the wine by supplementing production with non-estate fruit. He finds organically farmed grapes from other vineyards that are cultivated at Spottswoode's same level of quality.

"It's not large production, so I can pick and choose, and I'm not paying for vineyard-designates," says Weinkauff. "There are still growers out there with extra fruit. We can try new things and farm for lower prices. Not everything has to be perfectly manicured. You don't have to drop fruit."

Weinkauff blends the Cab with Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot, and even a drop of Malbec in the 2016 release. He ferments each independently with the aim to create bold aromatics and approachable mouthfeel. He also uses a lower percentage of new oak to age the wine.

"We support old-school farmers and have a little less overhead with a winery of our own," he says. "An attention to detail keeps expenses down."



Six Producers Bringing out the Best in California Zinfandel

Spottswoode 2016 Lydenhurst Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley); \$85, 95 points.

This wine continuously overdelivers for its price point, offering elegantly powerful flavors of fig, forest and earth. Grippy in firm tannins, it dances in secondary notions of black currant, sage, cedar and flint, with spicy clove lingering on the finish. **Editors' Choice**.

Turnbull 2016 Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley); \$50, 93 points. This wine offers remarkable value for the quality—a stellar commingling of cranberry, cassis and black cherry. With a robust mouthfeel of plump juicy fruit, gun smoke and firm tannin, it shows integrated oak flavors and plenty of underlying acidity to remain fresh in the glass. **Editors' Choice**.

Volker Eisele 2015 Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley); \$60, 92 points. This is made from the producer's Chiles Valley estate, organically farmed, and blended with 25% Merlot. A bright, perfumed nose of rose and sage leads to a soft, cohesive and well-integrated midpalate of dark cherry, raspberry and hints of vanilla and herb. It shows great length and breadth.



Left to right, Simon Faury of Merryvale; Marla Carroll of Antica Napa Valley; and Anthony Biagi Amici Cellars / Photo by Erin & Courtney De Jauregui

The Valley's Next Gen

Merryvale

Winemaker: Simon Faury

Growing up in **France**, Faury spent many of his formative years in the **Rhône Valley**, and he went on to study winemaking in Turin and **Bordeaux**. He worked around the globe before coming to Napa Valley, where Faury served stints at Robert Mondavi and **Harlan Estate** before ultimately landing at **Merryvale**. Equally worldly, the winery's owners, the Schlatter family, are natives of Switzerland.

"I think culturally, being French and Swiss, we are sensitive to price," says Faury. "We look to Europe and its range of quality wines at lower price points."

He searches the valley for sites with rocky, well-drained soils from which he can source fruit to make a \$65 Cabernet.

"It's exciting to make these wines," he says. "I try to be cunning in the vineyards. It's where I can create value. I look at soil maps of vineyards I like and ask, 'What is the dirt there?'"

In doing so, Faury has earned a deep knowledge of the area.

"The mountains, hillsides and valley floor reflect 360 degrees of the Napa Valley," he says. "I love what each area has to bring: the mountains, tannin; an area like Calistoga, vibrant, rich Mediterranean-like fruit; and Oak Knoll adds freshness and Old World spice, more classic elements of tension and ageability."

Ultimately, he aims for something essential. "I want the wines to be light and have drinkability," says Faury. "I drink a lot of them myself."

Antica Napa Valley

Winemaker: Marla Carroll

Carroll grew up in the Tehachapi Mountains, the southern border of California's Central Valley. So she's no stranger to sticker shock.

"For my parents, wine meant it was a special occasion--and \$20 was special occasion," she says.

For Carroll, 100% estate fruit is essential in order to make a stellar \$60 bottle of Cabernet at [Antica](#).

Antica's 1,210-acre property on Atlas Peak, owned by the Antinori family since the early 1990s, has 550 acres of vines that have been invested in over many years. The vast majority of its grapes are sold to other wineries; Antica keeps about 20% for its own production.

"A lot of thought goes into the price point," says Carroll. "We want to make sure our wine is getting out there and that people are enjoying it, but know it's no lesser quality than our higher price points."

Carroll makes the wine like she does the higher-priced Cabs. She decides after fermentation which barrels are better suited to be enjoyed sooner or need longer to age. She uses 50% new oak instead of 100%, but beyond that, no corners are cut.

"A great Antinori wine is Villa Antinori," says Glenn Salva, the wine estate manager. "The high quality of this wine at a reasonable price [\$35 and under] is only possible because of the family's commitment to own and control vineyards throughout [Tuscany](#). The Antinori philosophy holds true to our efforts in Napa Valley."

Amici Cellars

Winemaker: Anthony Biagi

Based just outside of Calistoga, [Amici](#) makes a wide range of wines that includes [Olema](#), a secondary, value-minded sister brand. Biagi makes the Napa Valley reds, from single-vineyard [Beckstoffer To Kalon Cabernet \(\\$195\)](#) to an outstanding \$50 Napa Valley Cab. He enjoys making this more accessible wine because he feels the art of blending is being lost in the Napa Valley.

"It's the Burgundization of California," says Biagi of the increasing focus on single vineyards. "In blending, you have to be cognizant of the cost of goods. I'm looking for diamonds in the rough, for vineyards people eschew that are not perfectly vertical-positioned. It's the Moneyball aspect, look for things people throw away."

That might mean including sites in lesser-known areas where price and yields better pencil out, adding [Merlot](#) and/or Malbec, or not employing 100% new oak.

"We're looking for sites that punch above their weight," he says. "But we're making the wine the way we would a great vineyard designate. I enjoy making the Napa Valley Cabernet because it's the one most people are going to touch."

Biagi remembers when Napa Valley Cabernet was on every wine list in America. He worries that's no longer true.

"You have to be careful about the raw materials," he says. "We put money into great grapes and great people to make great wine."



Behind Napa Valley's Hard-to-Find Pinot Noir

Amici 2016 Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley); \$50, 94 points. Youthful, this wine is blended with small amounts of Malbec, Merlot, Petit Verdot and Cabernet Franc. Together, they form a core of earthy cedar, clove and pencil shavings, with a bite of thick tannin taking on a leathery texture. Dark cherry, black currant and dark chocolate melt on the palate into a velvety whole. **Editors' Choice.**

Antica 2016 Mountain Select Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley); \$70, 94 points. This wine shows its mountain provenance in meaty, grippy and gritty tannins and a broad expansive weight on the palate. But beneath its brawn is beauty and a rounded lushness of delicious drinkability, a mix of brambly blackberry, cherry, cassis and crushed rock. Let it sit in the glass over time or consider cellaring. Enjoy 2026–2031. **Cellar Selection.**

Merryvale 2015 Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley); \$65, 92 points. This wine is blended with 5% Malbec and aged in 50% new French oak for 22 months. It offers juicy black fruit and pillowy, expansive tannins that provide firm structure and weight. The acidity provides tension against the wine's fruit-forward nature, with an accent of clove in the background.

Published on July 30, 2019

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Thank you for the article! Always great to read about different producers and what they're working on. Most of the producers you list are actually very expensive, who might make one wine that is reasonably priced. There are several producers in Napa that make wine that is as good or better, in the same fashion, more skus and are cheaper. Truchard is a farming family (the son started Butter). They make beautiful wine and most of the wines are between \$30-40. The Terraces is a beautiful property next door to Joseph Phelps on the hillside. They also make great wine where most are sold between \$30... [See More](#)

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