

The New York Times

Thursday, February 26, 2015 | Wine School | by Eric Asimov

FOOD

Your Next Lesson: Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon



In the first full year of Wine School, we've focused entirely on the fundamental types of wine that have served as a foundation for producers around the world. Now, for the first time, we'll examine a reinterpretation of one of those elemental styles as we take up Napa Valley cabernet sauvignon.

Napa cabernet, of course, was inspired by great Bordeaux, specifically [the wines of the Médoc](#). The pioneers of the style, like John Daniel of Inglenook, Beaulieu Vineyards and the Mondavi family, wanted to make red wines that could stand with the greatest reds in the world. For them, that meant Bordeaux.

Yet good Napa cabernet has never been a slavish copy of Bordeaux. For one thing, the nomenclature is essentially different. Bordeaux is defined by the place in which the grapes are grown; Napa by the dominant grape in the wine. In the Médoc, the wines are almost invariably a blend. Cabernet was historically the leading grape, supplemented primarily with merlot, cabernet franc and petit verdot. But only rarely would cabernet sauvignon make up 75 percent of the blend, as is required nowadays in California if you want to call a wine cabernet sauvignon.

While most cabernets are in fact cabernet-dominated blends in the Napa Valley, it's not unusual to find wines that are 100 percent cabernet, which you would never see in Bordeaux. In the last 20 years, many Napa Valley cabernets have also deviated from the classically austere Médoc model, pursuing a style defined by power, impact and exuberant fruit flavors. It's a divisive style with many admirers. I'm not one of them, so I've chosen bottles that I hope will represent the more classic Napa style.

The three bottles I recommend are:

Frog's Leap Napa Valley Rutherford Cabernet Sauvignon Estate Grown \$50

Philip Togni Napa Valley "Tanbark Hill" Cabernet Sauvignon 2012 \$55

Ramey Cellars Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon 2012 \$55

Yes, these wines are expensive. Yes, you no doubt can find cheaper alternatives, though many of them are one-offs, remainders or wines that simply won't demonstrate the characteristics of a representative Napa cabernet. The sad fact is, good Napa cabernet for less than \$50 is hard to come by.

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If you are able to make the investment but can't find any of these bottles, I highly recommend wines from Smith-Madrone, Heitz Cellar, Chateau Montelena, Volker Eisele, Dyer Vineyard, Sinsky, Corison, Napanook, Mayacamas and, if you don't mind spending even more, Spottswoode and Dominus.

If Napa cabernet seems to have become the official wine of American steakhouses, it's not without reason. These wines demand rich, fatty meats, simply prepared. Lamb is especially good, as are various beef roasts.

CHARACTERISTICS TO CONSIDER

AROMA

Sweet fruit? Savory? Something else?

ACCESSIBILITY

Cabernet sauvignon historically required a great deal of aging. These are young. Are they enjoyable now?

FOOD

The more powerful cabernets can overwhelm food. What about these?

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