

25 Splurge-Worthy California Reds

 [foodandwine.com/wine/red-wine/splurge-worthy-california-red-wine](https://www.foodandwine.com/wine/red-wine/splurge-worthy-california-red-wine)



Joseph Phelps Vineyards

When I set out to compile this list of 25 splurge-worthy [red wines from California](#), I knew I'd have a difficult task ahead. As a lifelong drinker and collector of wines from the state, I knew the quality would be high. What I *didn't* expect was just how fraught the process of narrowing down my selections would be. This list could have run to 40 bottles, easily.

Tasting dozens upon dozens of wines, all with a minimum suggested retail price of \$100, was fascinating, educational, delicious, and occasionally exhausting. But it wasn't monolithic. Because while it's still frustratingly common to hear otherwise well-versed wine lovers say that they just don't like [California reds](#)—as if the state is a single terroir with one style shared among all producers—the truth is that the state's wine culture is a lot more varied, interesting, and rewarding than that vinous stereotype implies.

ADVERTISING

inRead invented by Teads

While the lion's share of these wines are Cabernet Sauvignons or Cab-based blends, and predominantly from Napa and Sonoma—they, after all, tend to command the highest prices—there are some standout bottles of Merlot, Pinot Noir, and Cabernet Franc-based wines here too, and from other parts of the state.

My only wish is that the next time I embark on a project like this, I'll find more wines from other varieties as well—Syrah perhaps, or Grenache—that aim to justify prices in this ballpark. But that's also a good thing for consumers: Syrah from Pax, Pinot Noir from Kutch and Brewer-Clifton, Rhône varieties from Bonny Doon: All of them and more produce stellar wines that can be found for less than \$100 and over-deliver in a big way.

But I can't complain. These 25 reds represent what I consider to be some of the most splurge-worthy in the state—and, for many of them, the world. I've tried to balance the selections between widely accessible options and less-common gems that might take a bit of digging to find. They also represent a range of styles. All of them are worth the effort to look for.

In addition to these, I heartily recommend snapping up the Star Lane "Astral" from Santa Barbara's Happy Canyon, Sullivan's "James O'Neill" Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon from Rutherford, Sea Smoke's "Ten" Pinot Noir from the Sta. Rita Hills, Justin's "Isosceles" Reserve from Paso Robles, and Cabernets from Mayacamas, Peter Michael, Palmaz, Merus, Heitz, Gamble (notably their "Family Home"), Torcia's Abela Vineyard, and so many more that I couldn't include in this list for one reason or another but that are also excellent—delicious now and worthy additions to any collection.

So, explore the category of splurge-worthy reds as widely as possible, at least as far as your budget allows. They are as exciting and varied as I can ever recall. Here 25 of my my favorites, listed alphabetically.

2016 Cakebread Cellars Dancing Bear Ranch Cabernet Sauvignon Howell Mountain, Napa Valley (\$189)

This wine smells like mid-autumn in liquid form, with cloves and cinnamon lending spice to black cherries and ripe wild strawberries. There's a wonderful interplay of plums, blackberry liqueur, spice cake, cigar humidor, and dried violets with savory, almost bouillon-like umami notes.

Courtesy of Cardinale

2016 Cardinale Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley (\$325)

Star anise, Chinese five-spice powder, and hints of currants and cedar precede flavors of mixed mountain berries, candied violets, and blueberries that ripple out on the palate.. Amazing acidity and elegant tannins promise a very long life ahead.

2016 Chappellet Pritchard Hill Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley (\$235)

As with so many previous vintages of this wine, the 2016 will stand the test of time and age for decades. A licorice-seamed nose of mixed currants and cherries paves the way for a palate that's plenty generous already—boysenberries, blueberries, plums, sweet spice, and flowers.

Courtesy of Cliff Lede Vineyards

2016 Cliff Lede Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley (\$185)

A dense, rich swirl of baker's chocolate, cassis, sun-warmed wild strawberries, cigar humidor, and balsamic notes set the stage for a palate that carries flavors of bing and black cherries, sarsaparilla, and licorice root alongside flashes of sachertorte, black raspberries, ripe plums, and toasted fennel seed and cardamom. Give it a few years, and then enjoy through the 2040s.

2016 Corison Sunbasket Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon St. Helena, Napa Valley (\$195)

Tobacco, lavender, scrubby herbs, pencil shavings, and currants gently rise from the glass. This is one of those rare wines that is ripe yet not defined by its fruit, self-confident and centered yet not austere, and flecked through with cherries. Its minerality rolls into a finish that vibrates on the tongue for nearly a full minute. It left me speechless.

2015 Dalla Valle "Maya" Napa Valley (\$425)

Deeply savory aromas of forest floor, leather, and tobacco leaf join forces with currants, tarragon, and sage. The concentrated, complex palate practically swirls with balsamic notes, unexpectedly meaty peppercorns, violets and mountain flowers, plums, blackberries, black cherries, pencil shavings, cigar humidor, and a hint of walnuts on the long finish. Lay it down for a couple of years still, and then savor it through the late-2040s and beyond.

DAOU Family Estates

2016 DAOU Estate "Soul of a Lion" Paso Robles (\$125)

This is a ripe, rich blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, and Petit Verdot with a walnut edge to the toasty oak aromas that are still integrating into the plums and Mission figs. These precede a palate of richness and excellent acidity, with blackberries, plums, hoisin sauce, cinnamon, star anise, cocoa powder, and violets. A delicious example of what Paso Robles is capable of.

2016 Duckhorn Rector Creek Merlot Napa Valley (\$100)

Rich, yet clearly a wine of structure, this shows why Duckhorn remains one of the finest practitioners of Merlot in the state. Subtly loamy aromas of forest floor are complicated by licorice root and sweet-vanilla-spiced cherries, and turn to a palate whose breadth belies a serious sense of concentration, with flavors of black cardamom, charred fennel seed, leather, cedar, blackberries, and black plums.

2016 Emeritus “Don’s Block” Pinot Noir Hallberg Ranch, Russian River Valley (\$110)

Fresh yet concentrated, and so very lively, the acidity here paves a highway straight through the flavors of bing cherries and pomegranate seeds, all of it kissed with tarragon and flowers.

2017 Far Niente Cabernet Sauvignon 2017 Oakville, Napa Valley (\$200)

Cherry pit, orange rind, and slate-like minerality set the stage for a silky palate with concentrated flavors of currants, cherries, orange rind, and a bass-note of earthiness anchoring it all. Flowers peek through on the finish, and the oak is beautifully calibrated throughout. This one proves that more familiar wines can still have the ability to surprise and charm.

2016 Favia “Cerro Sur” Napa Valley (\$175)

This elegant Cabernet Franc-based blend showcases all of the aspects of the variety that you’d wish for—tobacco, brambly berries, hint of balsamic—with a remarkable sense of balance and propulsive energy that is too often missing. That success is no surprise, however, given that the fruit is grown while being overseen by viticulturalist Annie Favia and then coaxed to fruition by winemaker Andy Erickson, two of the best in the business. Sappy yet vivacious tannins offer structure to black cherries and currants that linger through a stunningly complex, minute-long finish.

2016 Joseph Phelps “Insignia” St. Helena, Napa Valley (\$300)

Toasty aromas of carpaccio, black cherries, cassis, blackberries, black cardamom, and maduro cigar tobacco tee up an effusive, brilliantly calibrated palate that vibrates with acid-zipped flavors of mixed cherries, huckleberries, blueberries, and espresso, all of it lingering with notes of violets, sandalwood, tobacco, and pencil shavings. This is built for the long-haul.

2016 Larkmead “Solari” Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley (\$240)

My friend Vanessa Conlin, Head of Wine for WineAccess, described this as a red of “power, complexity, and elegance.” I agree: It’s rich yet savory on the nose, with tar- and camphor-like aromas joined by forest floor, charred vanilla pod, cassis, chocolate ganache, and dried violets. The first sip is just as remarkable, with cracked peppercorns spicing up flavors of blackberries, candied violets, baker’s chocolate, espresso, and black licorice. Char up a pepper-crust steak to enjoy alongside it.

2015 Newton Spring Mountain District Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley (\$190)

Part of Newton’s appellation-specific lineup of estate-grown wines, this is aromatically generous with figs and currants that are cut through with dried Mediterranean herbs, green peppercorns, and floral blue fruits. On the palate, it shows excellent energy and concentration, with mineral-flecked flavors of currants, cedar, and brambly berries, with a finish that suggests sandalwood and Indian spices.

Passalacqua Winery

2014 Passalacqua TR Passalacqua Vineyard Block 4 Cabernet Sauvignon Dry Creek Valley (\$109)

Only 68 cases were produced of this Dry Creek standout. It’s creamy and subtly plush on the nose with an undertow of gently smoldering sage that heads to a concentrated palate boasting mixed currants, black raspberries, mineral, and a lingering, almost saline edge to the cigar tobacco and fig flavors.

2016 Quintessa Red Wine Rutherford, Napa Valley (\$190)

Brooding and serious right off the bat, this is the wine equivalent of the opening chords of Beethoven’s Fifth: Tar, black licorice, camphor, and black plums with peppercorn. But then, on the palate, its full bounty becomes clear, with a deep well of blackberries, dark baking spices, star anise, scorched earth, and dried flowers. Still a baby, but with great potential.

2016 Ridge Monte Bello Santa Cruz Mountains (\$225)

This reminds me of a young Pauillac, with pencil shavings, currants, and just the slightest hint of dried herbs. It all precedes a palate both propulsive and wildly complex, the lively flavors of currants, cherries, and brambly berries seasoned with sage and a hint of thyme. The finish lingers with a subtle suggestion of flowers and a punch of spice and cigar humidors. Phenomenal.

2016 Robert Mondavi Winery The Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon To Kalon Vineyard (\$175)

Subtle with aromas of tobacco, cherry pit, and charcoal, this has an underlying sense of power that promises decades of life ahead. The palate shows sweeter and more generous fruit than the nose implies, and is pulsed through with muscle and definition: Currants, purple flowers, and licorice covered in chocolate prevail right now, and deliciously so. The juxtaposition of ripe, generous fruit alongside more savory notes is fantastic.

2016 Sebastiani Cherryblock Cabernet Sauvignon Sonoma Valley, Sonoma County (\$150)

Sebastiani may be more well-known for its everyday-priced offerings, but this exuberant Cab is worth a look. It's fresh and bursting with cherries and mixed berries and leaves notes of cinnamon stick, ripe black raspberries, and a touch of pomegranate syrup in its wake. The slightest hint of smoldering sage complicates the delicate yet persistent finish.

2015 Shafer "Hillside Select" Cabernet Sauvignon Stags Leap District, Napa Valley (\$310)

Monumental from the very first sniff: Lifted black licorice, star anise, toasted caraway seeds, and plum-spice cake lead to a palate dripping with sweet, generous fruit—plums, blackberries, mulberries, huckleberries—as well as blueberries, purple-blossomed flowers, Chinese five-spice powder, and gunflint minerality. This is so generous and ripe, yet kept in check by serious structure that, though it's totally irresistible right now, will carry this through the next 25 years or more. But I wouldn't be able to wait that long.

2016 Signorello Estate "Padrone" Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley (\$200)

With a nose of pencil shavings, licorice, and allspice, and a palate that seems to melt over the tongue with flavors of cocoa powder, charred sage, currants, oolong tea, fresh-dug chanterelles, and vanilla pod, this is already stunning for a wine with a long future ahead.

2016 Spottswoode Estate Cabernet Sauvignon St. Helena, Napa Valley (\$225)

Confident, powerful, and subtle on the nose, with toasted fennel seeds and tea that, with air, allow in aromas of cacao nibs, black cherries, and licorice. The first sip reveals a wine that glistens with flavors of plums and mixed mountain berries, sweet vanilla-scented cherry pastry crème, pie crust (but not sweet), blueberries, sandalwood, well-aged cigars, and mountain flowers. The finish rolls on for a full two minutes. Now or in three decades, this is a winner.

2015 Taylor Family Vineyards “Cumulus” Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley (\$225)

Proof that power and elegance can coexist in Napa, this smells of brambly berries, floral black peppercorns, and a hit of charred sage alongside five-spice powder and plum cake. On the palate, this is a mouth-filling Cab that never sacrifices structure for lushness. Flavors of black figs, hoisin sauce, ramen broth, blackberries, mulberries, and currants precede a finish that’s gorgeously savory, with a bone-marrow-like character to the purple plums and mulberries, wrapping up with a hint of blueberry conserve.

2017 TOR “Black Magic” Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley (\$350)

Deep and mysterious on the nose, this barrel-selection Cab offers licorice, loam, and blackberry pastry crème joined by the suggestion of mashed mulberries and sweetly spiced plum cake. These translate to a velvet-textured palate with demi-glace-enrobed venison, forest floor, blackberry liqueur, chocolate ganache, anise, allspice, and an almost salty mineral note alongside the springtime flowers. This has richness to spare, and the structure to carry it.

2016 Vérité “La Joie” Sonoma County Red Wine (\$410)

This is the kind of wine you could smell for hours and be perfectly happy: Wild strawberries, black raspberries, herbes de Provence, and the subtle spice of excellent French oak. The palate is perfectly balanced, generous and broad, yet precise at the same time, with flavors of cherry clafoutis, cacao nibs, cigar tobacco, and sweet spice, as well as nods in the direction of blackberries, cassis, and black raspberries. Lingering notes of pencil lead and cedar make this remarkably food friendly even this early in its evolution.