

CONNOISSEURS' GUIDE TO CALIFORNIA WINE



Zinfandel and Barbera, two red varieties whose local fortunes have ebbed and flowed for well over a hundred years, get a long look in this month's issue. Both share in having been first planted in California during the nineteenth century and are among the very few grapes not from France that have succeeded in finding an enduring niche in the vinous landscape of the West Coast. Zinfandel, whose European origins are still subject to minor debate, has become California's Heritage grape and accounts for most of the state's oldest extant vineyards, while Barbera looks to be undergoing something of a mini revival.

Both have long been planted in hot inland districts and used chiefly in cheaper generic blends, but both have also found favor with artisan winemakers who recognized that they are capable of making interesting wines when treated as legitimate varieties on their own. Zinfandel, of course, has overcome its humble beginnings and countless fine examples are found from Napa, Sonoma and Mendocino to Paso Robles and the Sierra Foothills.

Barbera's local history, however, is marked by very few high points, and, after a brief and rather limited bit of interest in the 1960s and 1970s, Barbera has claimed a tiny following at best. It has, in fact, been a very long time since we have taken the time and space to review California Barberas, but a critical mass of quality offerings, mostly from Amador County, has been reached, and we have been pleasantly surprised at just how good many of the wines are.

The road to success for Chardonnay has, by comparison, been as smooth as can be, and fashion and fame have come far easier than for Zinfandel and Barbera. It started getting serious attention in the 1960s, and its popularity soared in the following decade. It has steadily gathered fans on its way to becoming the most widely planted fine-wine variety in California today. Its arc of achievement continues to climb with the two outstanding harvests of 2012 and 2013. With its broad range of styles from buttery to bright, it offers something to like for most every taste, and there are simply no pretenders to its throne.

ZINFANDEL

We have always been great fans of good Zinfandel, especially when tomatoey pastas and savory pork dishes are on the menu, but good Zinfandel can rise to serious heights, and the better versions are far more than simple "spaghetti reds."

CHARDONNAY

The beat goes on. California's most popular white grape has shown remarkable success first in 2012 and then again in 2013, and good just keeps getting better. The number of outstanding examples is striking, and the best, such as the new lot from David Ramey, will stand with the finest in the world.

BARBERA

A small, but significant number of new Barbera bottlings is causing a few heads to turn, and, while still limited in number and unlikely to become the "next big thing" in California, there are more than a few from the Sierra Foothills that wine lovers should most definitely try.

BEST BUYS

Cabernet Sauvignon, its Bordelaise cousin Merlot and a handful of noteworthy offerings made from white Rhône varieties earn an appreciative nod for fine value in this issue.

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BEST BUYS IN THE MARKET

CABERNET SAUVIGNON



The search for fine values among Cabernet Sauvignon is more often than not a task demanding of patience and few rewards, but the 2012 and 2013 vintages have turned out far more good buys than we have seen in some time. The well-crafted and curranty 🍷 **HESS COLLECTION Allomi Napa Valley 2012** (\$30.00) is joined by the substantial, yet nicely balanced 🍷 **MIRO Reserve Silverwood Vineyard 2012** (\$30.00) in outperforming a good many Cabernets costing two and even three times as much, and, if not quite as rich, the trim, wonderfully supple 🍷 **RODNEY STRONG Sonoma County 2012** (\$20.00) wins its place on the Best Buy roster by dint of keen fruity focus. The moderately deep, similarly well-focused 🍷 **KENDALL-JACKSON Grand Reserve Sonoma County 2012** (\$28.00) earns comfortable inclusion as well, and the precise, relatively complex 🍷 **EDGE Napa Valley 2012** (\$22.00) and the polished, insistently fruity 🍷 **WELLINGTON Sonoma County 2011**

(\$22.00) are proof that good Cabernet does not need to break the bank. Among wines checking in a just less than full one-star endorsement, the precise, solidly structured **CHESSMAN Santa Ynez Valley 2013** (\$16.00) will improve with a few years of age, and the **BOGLE California 2012** (\$12.00), the **CHIME California 2013** (\$13.00) and the **INSATIABLE California 2013** (\$13.00) are honestly varietal, ready-to-drink Cabernets whose decidedly modest price tags make them go down all the easier.

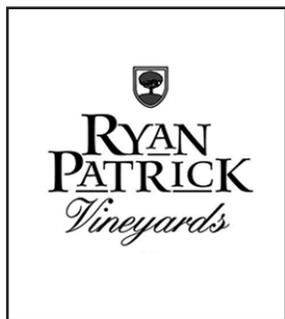
WHITE RHÔNES

Leading the way among this month's eclectic roster of price-worthy white wines from varieties that call France's Rhône region home, the 🍷🍷🍷 **DAOU Chemin de Fleurs Paso Robles 2013** (\$36.00) may be a bit expensive for casual quaffing, but it marries Grenache Blanc, Viognier and Roussanne in a deep and beautifully composed wine whose impressions of layered complexity and impeccable crafting are rarely seen at the price.

The bright and buoyant, 🍷🍷 **TABLAS CREEK Patelin de Tablas Blanc Paso Robles 2013** (\$20.00), which similarly relies heavily on Grenache Blanc and Viognier, is one of the top white-wine values around, and the 🍷 90-point **ADELAIDA Estate Viognier Paso Robles 2013** (\$25.00) is a very rich and well-concentrated working that is long on Viognier's peachy fruit. The zesty, firmly balanced 🍷 **ZACA MESA Viognier Santa Ynez Valley 2013** (\$16.00) comes with the added bonus of being widely available, and its cellarmate, the well-ripened 🍷 **ZACA MESA Z Blanc Santa Ynez Valley 2012** (\$20.00) combines Roussanne, Marsanne and Viognier and gets the nod for its richness and fine vitality.



MERLOT



We are both surprised and bemused by Merlot's ongoing lack of respect, but if that explains why so many attractive examples can be found at such reasonable prices, then we are not about to complain. The fruity and friendly 🍷 **CA' MOMI Napa Valley 2013** (\$22.00), for example, is long on the varietal's juicy, black cherry charms, and the well-balanced, generously filled 🍷 **CHACEWATER Sierra Foothills 2012** (\$21.00) is inviting right now but is bound to impress even more if allowed to rest for a years. **KENDALL-JACKSON** checks in with its second Best Buy mention this month for its 🍷 **Grand Reserve Sonoma County 2012** (\$26.00), and two wines from Washington State, the plump, well-ripened, Merlot-based 🍷 **RYAN PATRICK Rock Island Red Wahluke Slope 2012** (\$20.00) along with its comparatively simple, clean-as-can-be cellarmate, the bargain-priced 85-point **RYAN PATRICK Redhead Red Columbia Valley 2013** (\$10.00) get a big thumbs-up vote for value in their respectively richer and somewhat more light-hearted styles.

CONNOISSEURS' SERIES



Created by the California Wine Club exclusively for Connoisseurs' Guide readers, and featuring only our two-star and three-star selections, the CONNOISSEURS' SERIES wine-of-the-month club makes hard to get wines available for you. Featured this month are: 🍷🍷🍷 **BEEKEEPER**



Zinfandel Madonna Spring Vineyard 2012, 🍷🍷 **LEWIS Cabernet Sauvignon "Mason's" 2012**, 🍷🍷 **STORYBOOK MOUNTAIN Zinfandel Eastern Exposures Napa Valley 2012** and 🍷🍷 **TESTAROSSA Pinot Noir Sierra Madre Vineyard Santa Maria Valley 2013**.

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