

CONNOISSEURS' GUIDE TO CALIFORNIA WINE



January is Zinfandel month here at CGCW, and California's unique claim to vinous fame gets an in-depth look once again. The reality is that Zin is a grape that has never been visited by broad critical acclaim, and outside of the wild popularity that the ocean of candied White Zinfandel enjoyed in the past, its niche in the fine wine market has always been smaller than those of the classic European varieties. While that may be true, it has been enthusiastically embraced by a particularly devout cohort of fans, and, even if experiencing a bit of a lull in the market of late, there are more than enough fascinating and downright delicious renditions to satisfy those who fervently believe, just as we do, that the wine world would be a poorer place but for Zinfandel's inclusion. Well-made examples, as we are reminded by this month's collection, deliver pleasures aplenty at prices that keep Zinfandel at the top of our list of fine red-wine values, and, while it remains our go-to choice as an affordable foil to tomatoey pastas and barbecued fare of all sorts, the best bottlings are involving wines of great richness and depth that belong in the cellars of all wine lovers.

Sauvignon Blanc makes an appearance this month as well and, in many ways, parallels Zinfandel both in affording lots to like for the money and in fighting for the recognition it deserves. It typically accounts for a higher percentage of CGCW "Good Value" mentions than any other white wine, and those more ambitious offerings from top producers, many of whom are represented in this issue, who have over the years mastered its ways are convincing testimony that good Sauvignon Blanc is anything but a simple, everyday quaff. And, finally, a quick look at a nearly two dozen, new, not-to-be-missed Chardonnays concludes the reviews in our January edition.

Before closing, however, we take a moment to muse on the trends and lessons learned in 2016 and give a special CGCW tip of the hat to those wines and wineries that have shown most brightly in what has been a very good year. Charles and Stephen get a chance to pick their very favorites, and considering the many high points of the year, their admittedly enviable task was not easy.

ZINFANDEL

Important new Zinfandels from long-time favorite producers such as Jeff Cohn, Storybook Mountain, Ottimino and Bella are reviewed this month, and breakthrough bottlings from Rock Wall and the Tonti Family among others are exciting reminders that happy surprises always await with each new vintage.

SAUVIGNON BLANC

From bright, brisk and grassy to weighty, oaky and rich, Sauvignon Blanc is a wine that defies easy categorization, and, while some are perfect partners to platters of fresh oysters, others match up beautifully with far richer dishes.

CHARDONNAY

Suffice it to say that when it comes to good California Chardonnay, the beat goes on. Impressive new releases from Chasseur and Talley head up our latest look at new releases, and we report on a number of affordable and very tasty wines that hit the mark for good value smartly as well.

THE YEAR IN REVIEW AND EDITORS' PICKS OF THE BEST WINES OF THE YEAR

Although we hopefully anticipate a season when rain returns to the West Coast, the extraordinary bounty of successful wines from the last several drought-challenged harvests was again the big story of 2016. As we look back over past twelve months, we are struck by the number of outstanding examples of most every variety that came our way and by the remarkable quality that has become the California winemaking norm.

BEST BUYS

It is the time of the year when most of our pocketbooks are feeling the pinch, but the thirst for good wine continues, and noteworthy values in Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay and Riesling mean that there is no reason to go without.

Best Wines of the Year 2016

Every year has its high points and its lows, and we opined at the close of 2015 that the preceding twelve months had been particularly memorable. At the risk of sounding both repetitive and a bit starry eyed, we confess to having a hard time containing our excitement as we look back over the thousands of new wines tasted during 2016. California has seen a succession of excellent harvests starting in 2012, and the state's vintners keep refining their craft with each vintage. When winemaking talent and nature's benisons meet as they most definitely have of late, our happy task of choosing favorites is far from easy. That of course, is no complaint, and, after much thought and discussion, we offer up our picks of what has been a very, very good year.

Winery of the Year: Schramsberg/J. Davies/Davies

Founded by Jack and Jamie Davies back in 1965, Schramsberg has earned a much-deserved reputation as California's pre-eminent home-grown producer of fine Méthode Champenoise sparklers. Over the years, Schramsberg has garnered more starred recommendations in the pages of Connoisseurs' Guide than any other sparkling wine maker, and its impressive showing in 2016 would be enough to justify "Winery of the Year" honors, but the winery's considerable success does not stop there. In the mid-1990s, Schramsberg began planting Cabernet Sauvignon for what would be their estate-grown J. Davies label, and, in 2009, Pinot Noirs from selected vineyards labeled simply as Davies were added to the family portfolio with new, non-estate Davies Cabernets following a few harvests later. Over the past year, the winery's many Cabernets and Pinots have performed at an exceptionally high level, and, with more than two dozen starred and multi-starred offerings in 2016, the distinguished Schramsberg/J. Davies/Davies collection has earned the winery our most enthusiastic vote as the outstanding producer of 2016.

Red Wine of the Year:

DIAMOND CREEK Cabernet Sauvignon Gravelly Meadow 2013, TREFETHEN Cabernet Sauvignon Halo 2012, SHAFER Cabernet Sauvignon Hillside Select 2012 and PATLAND Cabernet Sauvignon Select Barrel Reserve 2013

There are years in which a single wine stands out as the clear pick of the bunch, but, in 2016, we admit to being hopelessly stymied when trying to select but one as the best, and our unprecedented quartet of 97-point winners from the Napa Valley seems appropriate for what is very arguably the most exciting year of tasting new Cabernet Sauvignons that we can recall.

White Wine of the Year:

RAM'S GATE Chardonnay Estate Vineyard 2014, MOONE-TSAI Chardonnay Charles Heintz Vineyard 2014 and CHASSEUR Chardonnay Russian River Valley 2014

Just as was the case in considering the best red wines reviewed in 2016, there were several stunning Chardonnays that finished in a dead heat in the race for top honors among the year's most memorable whites. Ram's Gate and Chasseur are pre-eminent Chardonnay producers and regular recipients of high accolades, and Moone-Tsai's lovely Charles Heintz Vineyard bottling reaffirms our strong belief that its maker's name deserves to be much better known.

CHARLES OLKEN'S Best of the 🌸 Wines

BEEKEEPER Zinfandel Madrone 2013
DAOU White Rhône Chemin de Fleurs 2014
DIAMOND CREEK Cabernet Sauvignon Gravelly Meadows 2013
GRGICH HILLS Late Harvest White Violetta 2013
JEFF COHN Syrah Domaine des Chirats 2013
KRUPP BROTHERS Syrah Black Bart 2013
MOONE-TSAI Chardonnay Charles Heintz Vineyard 2014
PAUL HOBBS Pinot Noir Hyde Vineyard 2013
SCHRAMSBERG J. SCHRAM Sparkling Wine Brut Rosé 2008
TREFETHEN Cabernet Sauvignon Oak Knoll District 2012

Best of the 🌸 Wines

BELLA Zinfandel Florence Vineyard 2012
BLACKBIRD Merlot Arise 2014
DEHLINGER Pinot Noir Champ de Mars 2013
DRAGONETTE Sauvignon Blanc Grassini Family Vineyard 2013
DuMOL Pinot Noir Estate Vineyard 2014
FLORA SPRINGS Cabernet Sauvignon Holy Smoke Vineyard 2013
LANG & REED Cabernet Franc Two-Fourteen 2013
NOCETO Sangiovese Marmellata 2013
STOLPMAN Syrah Angeli 2014
THREE STICKS Chardonnay One Sky 2014

STEPHEN ELIOT'S Best of the 🌸 Wines

DAOU White Rhône Chemin de Fleurs 2014
DUCKHORN Merlot Three Palms Vineyard 2012
JEFF COHN Syrah Domaine des Chirats 2013
MOONE-TSAI Chardonnay Charles Heintz Vineyard 2014
PATLAND Cabernet Sauvignon Select Barrel Reserve 2013
RENWOOD Zinfandel Zanini Vineyard 2014
SCHRAMSBERG J. SCHRAM Sparkling Wine Brut Rosé 2008
SHAFER Cabernet Sauvignon Hillside Select 2012
STOLPMAN Syrah Hilltops 2014
WILLIAMS SELYEM Pinot Noir Hirsch Vineyard 2014

Best of the 🌸 Wines

BLACKBIRD Merlot Illustration 2013
BOONY DOON Le Cigare Volant Réserve 2011
CLOS SOLÈNE La Rosé 2015
EIGHTY FOUR Petite Sirah 2010
FIDDLETOWN CELLARS Barbera Reserve 2013
I MILLE Cabernet Franc 2012
KELLEHER Sauvignon Blanc "Block 21" 2014
RAM'S GATE Chardonnay Carneros 2014
RAVENSWOOD Zinfandel Barriccia 2013
WESTWOOD Grenache Elevation Annadel Gap Vineyard 2014