

Wine Spectator

Great California Values

How to beat high prices and find the best the golden state has to offer

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California makes the lion's share of the wine consumed in the United States, from the simplest white Zinfandels to the most sought-after cult Cabernet Sauvignons. Vineyards extend up and down the Golden State, and most Americans get their first taste of wine from one of California's nearly 2,700 wineries.

Yet along with this abundance comes a paradox. Simply stated, California doesn't dominate what most of us consider the values category. There are several reasons for this state of affairs, including the state's lofty land prices and the keen market demand for its highest-quality wines.

However, there are still many rich veins to tap when it comes to mining values from California. Our strategy in this report was to hit the state's viticultural sweet spot: exceptional quality at less-than-exorbitant prices.

The first parameter was quality at the highest level (90 or more points on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale), while a price ceiling of \$50 per bottle was set to ensure the greatest diversity and number of wines. Attention was also paid to availability, with production amounts for the most part measured in thousands of cases. Finally, we focused on the most recent releases; many of the recommended wines were tasted within the last two months in our Napa office. Our search yielded a diversity of terrific wines, including some surprises. And it pointed to some important trends; for instance, Syrah contributed more wines to our list than did any other variety, and Napa Valley asserted its primacy despite its pricy reputation.

The final inventory of 51 outstanding values runs the gamut of what's produced in California. It's a list that should excite any California wine lover, from traditionalists who cellar Cabernet and Chardonnay, to those leaning toward Rhône Valley-inspired wines, to Pinot Noir and sparkling wine fans. In the following pages, you will find tasting notes and profiles that provide insight into these top values and their makers. (There's also a summary chart to use as a handy reference when wine shopping; to give you more options, we have beefed it up with wines scoring 84 to 89 points that are priced at \$25 or less. Nearly 190 values are represented in all.)

Among our profiled wineries are some genuine superstars. The 2004 Robert Mondavi Napa Valley Oakville Cabernet, a pair of Burgundian beauties from Mount Eden in the Santa Cruz Mountains, and two wines from venerable Napa producer Beringer are among the outstanding offerings you'll find.

MOUNT EDEN

Chardonnay Santa Cruz Mountains 2004 | 94 | \$42 | 1,568 cases

Ultraripe, rich and opulent, yet maintains a sense of balance and proportion, with layers of honey, fig, melon and a hint of marshmallow.

Pinot Noir Santa Cruz Mountains 2004 | 90 | \$42 | 609 cases

Fragrant wilted rose petal, cherry and blackberry notes are spicy and delicate. Complex in an elegant, understated manner.

Both of these wines, as well as the winery's estate-grown Cabernet, would make a list of the best and most ageworthy in California. What makes these two gems so special is their similarity to French Burgundies in style, delicacy, balance and ability to improve over time. Winemaker Jeffrey Patterson excels with these wines in warm and cool years alike: in warmer years the flavors are fuller and richer; in cooler years they display more mineral and earthy touches. The vines, grown at 2,000 feet, are among the oldest of their kind in the state.—J.L.