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California's Vintage of the Century The 1997 Cabernets are magnificent and plentiful, and Napa Valley leads the way

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Posted: November 7, 2000

In a decade flush with magnificent wines from superlative vintages, along comes 1997 to cap things off with a giant exclamation point. In terms of sheer quality and volume, 1997 is the vintage of the century for California Cabernet Sauvignon.

It is a truly monumental year that wine lovers will be buzzing about for a long time to come.

In two decades of reviewing California Cabernet, I've never tasted so many stunning wines from a single vintage, nor given this many outstanding scores. In tasting after tasting, the profound richness, depth, complexity, finesse and flavor in these wines was simply astounding. I give the 1997 vintage an overall rating of 98 points, or classic, on Wine Spectator's 100-point scale.

If you ever needed a good reason to stockpile California Cabernet, this is it. Across the board, the 1997 vintage is an enormous success, with dozens of dazzling wines that are rich in flavor, deeply concentrated and impeccably balanced. While these wines are gushing with ripe, opulent, juicy currant, black cherry, wild berry and spicy nuances, most are also well-framed by seductive oaky flavors of mocha, cedar and toasty vanilla.

The 1997s also are distinguished by round, plush tannins that are so smooth and lush, they render the wines sumptuous enough to drink now. Yet these ripe tannins can be deceptive. Beneath their velvety thickness is a firm, muscular backbone—a sign that these wines have the stuffing and structure to age for decades. When you encounter a vintage of the magnitude of 1997, it is because something magical happened in the vineyard, providing winemakers with the natural ingredients to make ultraspecial wines.

"It's hard to believe that you could get both large yields and extraordinary quality in the same vintage, but that's what happened in 1997," said Dean Sylvester, winemaker at Whitehall Lane. This Napa Valley winery, which has been on a roll the past few vintages, produced two stunning wines: a reserve (97 points, \$60) and the Leonardini Vineyard bottling (96, \$75).

Any time the subject is great American Cabernets, your hunt should begin in Napa Valley. There is only one place on earth beyond Napa Valley that produces Cabernet and Cabernet blends on this scale and that place is Bordeaux. California's other key Cabernet-growing areas, namely Sonoma Valley and Alexander Valley, also had banner vintage in 1997. Also, Justin winery in Paso Robles produced a spectacular wine with its Bordeaux-style red called Isosceles (\$40), which earned a 95-point rating. But overall, these other areas do not produce the breadth or volume of wine that Napa Valley does, even if their wines often provide an excellent quality-to-dollar ratio.

The greatest vineyards and estates in Napa Valley made extraordinary wines in 1997, many scoring in the mid- to high-90s, making for a breathtaking list. At the summit of quality from

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Napa Valley were two 99-point efforts: Bryant Family Vineyard (\$150), for the second year running, and David Arthur Elevation 1147 (\$75). Both wines were grown in vineyards along the eastern ridge of Napa Valley.

The people behind some of 97's best wines

They were followed closely at the 98-point mark by Dalla Valle with its Maya bottling (\$120), also grown along the eastern ridge; Flora Springs 20th Anniversary bottling, made only in magnums for \$300 a bottle; and Lokoya Mount Veeder (\$100). Another six wines each earned 97-point ratings--Harlan Estate, Merryvale, Martin Ray, Shafer, Viader and Whitehall Lane--while eight more hit 96 points, including Chateau St. Jean's Sonoma County Cinq Cpages (\$50), the 1996 version of which was Wine Spectator's wine of the year last year. Nine wines at 95 points round out the classic-scoring group.

For the complete article, please see the Nov. 15, 2000, issue of *Wine Spectator* magazine, page 48.

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Top-Scoring Cabernets and Blends

| Wine | Score | Price |
|--|--------------|--------------|
| DAVID ARTHUR Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Elevation 1147 1997 | 99 | \$75 |
| BRYANT FAMILY Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1997 | 99 | \$150 |
| DALLA VALLE Maya Napa Valley 1997 | 98 | \$120 |
| FLORA SPRINGS Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 20th Anniversary 1997 | 98 | \$300/1.5L |
| LOKOYA Cabernet Sauvignon Mount Veeder 1997 | 98 | \$120 |
| HARLAN ESTATE Napa Valley 1997 | 97 | \$225 |
| MERRYVALE Profile Napa Valley 1997 | 97 | \$85 |
| MARTIN RAY Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Diamond Mountain Vineyard 1997 | 97 | \$85 |
| SHAFER Cabernet Sauvignon Stags Leap District Hillside Select 1997 | 97 | \$NA |
| VIADER Napa Valley 1997 | 97 | \$60 |
| WHITEHALL LANE Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Reserve 1997 | 97 | \$60 |

Best-Value California Cabernets and Blends

| Wine | Score | Price |
|---|--------------|--------------|
| MADDALENA Cabernet Sauvignon Central Coast 1997 | 88 | \$10 |
| ESTANCIA Cabernet Sauvignon California 1997 | 87 | \$15 |
| GALLO OF SONOMA Cabernet Sauvignon Sonoma County 1997 | 87 | \$13 |

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|--|----|------|
| RUTHERFORD RANCH Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1997 | 87 | \$12 |
| ST. FRANCIS Cabernet Sauvignon Sonoma County California Selection 1998 | 87 | \$15 |
| STERLING Cabernet Sauvignon Central Coast Vintner's Collection 1998 | 87 | \$13 |
| WOLF RIDGE Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1997 | 87 | \$15 |
| LYETH Meritage North Coast 1997 | 86 | \$13 |

Smart Buys in California Cabernet

| Wine | Score | Price |
|--|--------------|--------------|
| ST. CLEMENT Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1997 | 93 | \$35 |
| A. RAFANELLI Cabernet Sauvignon Dry Creek Valley 1997 | 92 | \$28 |
| RAYMOND Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Reserve 1998 | 92 | \$28 |
| STAGS' LEAP WINERY Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1997 | 92 | \$35 |
| STONEHEDGE Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1997 | 92 | \$20 |
| BYINGTON Cabernet Sauvignon Santa Cruz Mountains Bates Ranch Vineyard 1997 | 91 | \$24 |
| FIFE Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1997 | 91 | \$28 |
| FRANUS Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1997 | 91 | \$32 |
| FREEMARK ABBEY Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1997 | 91 | \$26 |
| GUENOC Cabernet Sauvignon North Coast 1997 | 91 | \$17 |
| KENDALL-JACKSON Cabernet Sauvignon California Grand Reserve 1997 | 91 | \$30 |
| MONTICELLO Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Jefferson Cuveé 1997 | 91 | \$25 |
| STONEGATE Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1997 | 91 | \$25 |

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