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California Cabernet Does

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California Cabernet Does Age

**A great showing by the 1978s is unquestionable
proof of their stature and cellar-worthiness**

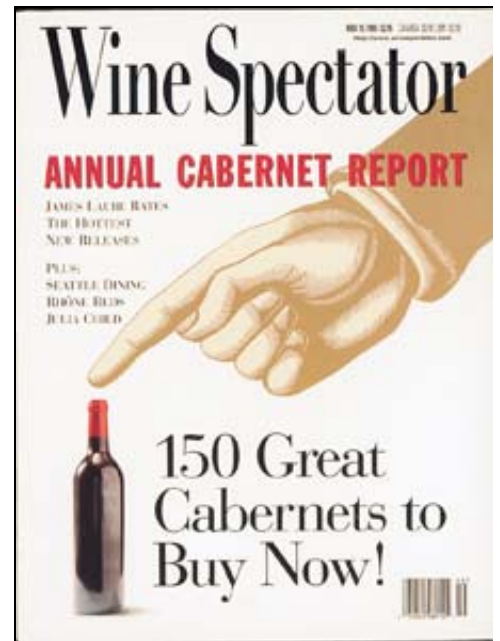
By James Laube

Now that they're 20, can they make it to 30? It's a real possibility for the elite Cabernet Sauvignons of 1978, one of the most celebrated vintages in California history. The best wines from this acclaimed year are in the kind of vigorous shape that suggests they're healthy bets to age another decade or more.

The longevity of these wines should come as no surprise to wine lovers who have been fortunate enough to taste the rare old Cabernets of Beaulieu Vineyard, the original Inglenook, Heitz, Ridge, Mayacamas, Louis M. Martini and many others. But until the early 1980s, that group of wine lovers was small, and so was the pool of mature wines that showed California bottlings benefit from cellaring. As the millennium approaches, there now exist enough well-aged wines from top vineyards to answer the question: Do California wines age?

Skeptics--proponents of the old school who still believe that California wines are merely flashy, ultraripe but clumsy, and can't age as well as their French counterparts from Bordeaux--would find it hard to hold on to their prejudices if they could taste the group of 45 wines that *Wine Spectator* assembled for this report. A total of 21 of these 1978 Cabernets, from Diamond Creek, Joseph Phelps, Beringer, Duckhorn, Chateau Montelena and others, were still outstanding (or better) in quality; they appeared to be at or near the peak of their aging cycles, but showed ample fruit complexities, depth and dimensions that indicate they still have years to go.

In many cases, the 1978s I tasted, which are beautifully mature and ready to drink, sell for less at auction than new releases of the same wines that may be too tight and tannic to fully enjoy. This juxtaposition of age, quality and price exposes a grand buying opportunity for people who are willing to search



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auction catalogs and specialty wine shops for the older vintages.

The 1978 vintage in California was pivotal in many respects, coming as it did after a pair of drought years in 1976 and 1977, when crops were small and quality uneven. For the most part, the '76s were overripe and raisiny; the '77s mostly light and thin. Neither year inspired much excitement after a few years on the market.

You could hardly have blamed California vintners for being enthusiastic about the 1978 Cabernet Sauvignon harvest as it began. Many had just released their 1974 Cabernets, considered at the time to be the best vintage in the state's history, and they were enjoying the new-found attention of wine lovers and critics—many of whom were just discovering California wine and were thrilled by the passion and promise of places like Napa Valley.

When it started to rain in early 1978, ending the drought, people in Northern California cheered. After two years of frugal water use, they could again wash their cars, water their lawns and flush their toilets. As the 1978 growing season unfolded, everything seemed to fall into place. The underground water table had been restored. Spring produced a large-sized grape set, and a mild to warm growing-season followed. The summer and fall provided what many believed were nearly perfect growing conditions for Cabernet, which indeed ripened exceptionally well, yielding juicy, plump berries, a lot of high sugar-readings—and plenty of wine.

The 1978 Cabernets seemed to come out right no matter what the winemakers did. "Nature gave us great wines right out of the vineyard," says Craig Williams, winemaker at Phelps. Now, with another 19 vintages behind him, Williams states flatly: "I'd take another '78 any day."

The 1978s were released in 1982 and 1983 to wide critical praise, and consumers flocked to corner the new wines. Their quality helped solidify California's Cabernet credentials well beyond the state's borders. Wine drinkers in New York, Boston, Dallas, Chicago and Miami—many of whom collected classified Bordeaux—suddenly began to take notice. Collectors who had snapped up the 1974 Cabernets—and those who missed that vintage—were setting their sights on the '78s. The California wine boom that began in the 1970s was now making real noise.

California wine didn't blossom overnight. It had been slowly building momentum through the late 1960s and early 1970s. More media attention was being paid to the fledgling wine industry, as the nation as a whole experienced a back-to-nature, live-off-the-land revival that swept through many parts of the country. It turned out that wine had a special romantic aura, and it proved more compelling to make, consume and write about than were other agricultural products. Napa Valley, with its grand old wineries lining Highway 29, the main thoroughfare, was becoming a tourist destination. Stories in national magazines such as *National Geographic* and *Time* inspired interest in the new names and faces in wine.

If you knew anything about California wine at that time, you probably knew the name Napa Valley, for it transcended the wine business and became the focal point for high quality, superpremium wines using the classic European varieties—Cabernet Sauvignon for complex, age-worthy reds and, to a lesser extent, some Pinot Noir and Chardonnay for Burgundian-style wines. Still, even in the 1970s, most of the vineyards in Napa Valley and neighboring Sonoma County were a hodgepodge of less-glamorous grapes. Oftentimes, vineyards were field blends of varieties that even the owners couldn't distinguish. Most

wine consumed was generic and sold in jugs as red or white table wine—not as Cabernet, Chardonnay or Merlot.

Yet the mosaic of vineyards and wineries was beginning to sort itself out, and 1978 marked an important turning point. As soon as the 1978 harvest had been picked, crushed and fermented, renowned vintners such as Robert Mondavi and Joe Heitz were proclaiming 1978 another great vintage for Napa Valley Cabernet—maybe even better than 1974, or at least a worthy successor. Names like Mondavi, Heitz, Beaulieu, Martini, Mayacamas, Ridge, Simi and Freemark Abbey, wineries with at least 10-year track records, were among those that Cabernet aficionados and collectors sought out when the '78s were released. Many other promising Cabernet wineries had arrived early in the 1970s, such as Chateau Montelena, Joseph Phelps, Conn Creek, Clos Du Val, Clos du Bois, Burgess, Diamond Creek, Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, Jordan, Silver Oak, Cakebread, Villa Mt. Eden, Kenwood and Steltzner.

For a few wineries, notably Duckhorn, Pine Ridge, Shafer, Shown & Son, Niebaum-Coppola, Iron Horse and Keenan, 1978 was either the first vintage or the year that made their reputations. Beringer had begun its Private Reserve Cabernet bottling. Steltzner used "Stags Leap District" on its label in 1978, years before the official appellation was approved. In small print at the bottom of a Caymus bottling appeared the name Grace Family Vineyard. Some wineries, such as William Hill, made their best Cabernet ever, and have since struggled to regain that form. A few, including Veedercrest and Shown, soon disappeared, victims of an industry-wide shakeout in the 1980s.

The 1978 vintage also fostered a psychic breakthrough for California winemakers and collectors of California wines. "There was this sense that all of a sudden there were a number of California **Cabernet** producers out there, people who had started in the early '70s, that were making great wines," recalls Paul Draper, winemaker at Ridge Vineyards in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

Those producers had been lured to the California wine business in the 1970s not only by the rising quality of the wines, but by promising economic forecasts that made the wine business look financially attractive. After great vintages in 1968, '69, '70 and '74—years when the Cabernets from Beaulieu Vineyard, Robert Mondavi and Heitz were extraordinary—the rush was on in Napa and Sonoma counties. Dozens of new wineries appeared and more vines were planted. "We suddenly saw we could do it," says Dan Duckhorn. "It wasn't just isolated wineries like Heitz or Mondavi making good wines—a lot of people were making good wines."

It was a profound change. The focus in California in the 1960s and early 1970s had been on reviving the wine industry—just making good wines to drink—because the industry had been largely dormant after Prohibition and World War II. By 1978, most leading vintners were using winemaking techniques that would create more sophisticated wines.

Today, the top 1978 Cabernets showcase the vintage's ripe-flavored personality, offer deep, rich, complex flavors and the kind of intensity, concentration and length that bode well for the future. Beyond its durability, 1978 is a vintage that strongly expresses itself and distinguishes itself from others. The best are quite youthful, with mature yet vibrant fruit flavors and firm, ripe tannins.

How does 1978 stack up against other years? It's always a challenge to sort out the top vintages. In the 1970s alone, 1970, '74 and '78 had many great wines. And there are fans of other vintages that decade as well. Yet none has

the depth and breadth of '78. At this point, I rate it slightly higher than either '74 or '70, both of which are now in decline. Overall, 1978 ranks among the top vintages of the past 25 years, along with 1970 and '74, 1985 and '87, 1990, '91 and '94 (for more California Cabernet vintage ratings, see our vintage chart, page 77).

While the 1978s made a superb showing in a series of *Wine Spectator* tastings when they were released, vintners were split on the vintage's quality. Chuck and Charlie Wagner of Caymus Vineyards, for instance, along with Bernard Portet at Clos Du Val, favored their sleeker, less opulent 1979 Cabernets. Skeptics claimed the 1978 wines were too ripe and predicted they would age poorly—and some have.

Many California vintners, in fact, were so new to wine and uncertain about the character and style of their 1978s that when some critics panned the '78 Cabernets as being overwrought, the winemakers suddenly changed styles. Instead of seeking ripe grapes with 24 percent to 25 percent sugar content, some winemakers backed off and picked their grapes at lower sugar levels. Those who did this often pointed to the lower alcohol levels found in Bordeaux reds; but they were also comparing their wines to Bordeaux of the 1978, '79 and '80 vintages—all good but unexceptional vintages, and surely not appropriate models for California Cabernet.

By the early 1980s, a high acidity, "food wine" craze had set in and it wasn't until the superripe, rich and opulent 1982 Bordeaux hit the market that California vintners realized their mistake. By 1984 and 1985, the best winemakers had returned to making more plush, flavorful wines. In fact, the whole period from the mid-'70s to the mid-'80s changed much of the thinking about how best to make great Cabernet.

Two of the trends were to replant older vineyards and seek smaller crops with grapes that were more concentrated. Vintners increased experimentation with blending, too, adding small portions of Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Malbec and Petit Verdot to the Cabernet Sauvignon. Fermentation techniques also changed, as winemakers sought to make more natural wines by picking grapes that seemed physiologically ripe, instead of using sugar levels to determine ripeness.

Many winemakers stopped paying attention to pH and acidity readings and began to rely more on tasting the grapes. Many more stopped adding tartaric acid to their cuvées and cut back on filtering and fining. Experience using new French oak and advances with higher quality American oak led to better balanced wines. Tannin management—making sure grapes are ripe and tannins are softer—is a major theme in California winemaking.

For California Cabernet collectors, though, the hearty showing by the best 1978s is encouraging because ageability is one of the key measures of a great wine. Should they age their Cabernets? When are they at their peaks?

When aging a wine, there are tradeoffs to be sure, and a lot depends on your tastes. With age, you sacrifice some of the upfront fruity, grapey qualities and precise flavors such as ripe plum, black cherry, currant, herb and anise. In exchange, those flavors mature and develop less obvious nuances and themes. Also the tannins, which come primarily from the grape skins and can make a young wine chewy or astringent in texture, become more smooth and polished, even silky. If you like wine with a lot of fruit flavor and don't mind a tannic texture or a vanilla-scented oak influence, then drinking your wine young is wise. If you like to have more mature or delicate flavors, then aging has its

advantages. With time, a wine's personality evolves, but the footprint of the vineyard—the signature flavors or structure—remains intact.

The key to the success of the 1978s is that they have aged slowly. They no longer have gobs of rich currant, plum and black cherry and youthful floral aromas. But you can still taste plenty of juicy fruit flavors, along with the cedar, spice, tea, anise, tobacco, sage and mineral nuances that become ever more evident in great Cabernet as it ages. The best 1978s have softened in texture, yet they have remained firm.

One of the ironies is that you can still buy 1978 Cabernet at auction, often at prices lower than those you'll pay for new releases from the same wineries. "Once California wines get to a certain age, they can start trailing off in price," says Bruce Kaiser of Butterfield, Butterfield & Dunning, an auction house in San Francisco. "The average price of most 1978s is going to be cheaper than wines released now."

For a taste of history, it might be worth your time and money to check out a few of the '78s. They'll show you what happened in the remarkable harvest of 1978, as well as provide insight into how long you should cellar the Cabernets you're buying now.

James Laube's Top-Scoring 1978 California Cabernets

WINE / SCORE / PRICE

DIAMOND CREEK Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Lake 1978 / 97 / \$275
Extraordinary. Atypical for Diamond Creek with its rich, fleshy texture and opulent fruit. Still young and vibrant, with complex flavors. My favorite of the DC Cabs.

DIAMOND CREEK Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Red Rock Terrace 1978 / 96 / \$100
Healthy color. Mature, but rich and complex, with an array of earthy currant, anise, cedar and herb notes, turning supple in texture. Can hold.

JOSEPH PHELPS Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Eisele Vineyard 1978 / 94 / \$156
Ripe, rich, deep, complex, flavorful. Has held its fruit, gained complexity, shows depth and polish. Tannins are softening in perfect balance.

DIAMOND CREEK Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Volcanic Hill 1978 / 93 / \$100
Dense, chewy, richly flavored, with earthy, leathery currant, spice, mineral. Finish suggests it can still hold.

JOSEPH PHELPS Insignia Napa Valley 1978 / 93 / \$83
Complex, with intriguing flavors of stewed plum, herb, sage, tobacco, cedar, spice. Elegant finish, with mellow tannins.

BERINGER Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Private Reserve 1978 / 92 / \$115
Dark, ripe and spicy, with complex, concentrated flavors that are rich and sharply focused. Finishes with firm tannins, but still shows lots of life.

CHATEAU MONTELENA Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1978 / 92 / \$255
Luxurious, with no signs of fading. The fruit is bright and the tannins have mellowed to give just the right backbone and structure. Can hold.

DUCKHORN Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1978 / 92 / \$68
Delivers complex flavors without being too ripe. Currant, black cherry, cedar and spice are vibrant and well integrated, finish is long and lively. Can hold.

MAYACAMAS Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1978 / 92 / \$82
Mature, still with some chalky tannins, but also an immense core of earthy tannins, currant, plum, pepper and mineral. Impeccably balanced. A Mayacamas great.

JOSEPH PHELPS Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Backus Vineyard 1978 / 92 / \$85
Firm, intense and spicy, with rich earth, mineral and currant, anise and cedar notes, a complex aftertaste. Notable structure and concentration.

RIDGE Cabernet Sauvignon Santa Cruz Mountains Monte Bello 1978 / 92 / \$125
Rich, concentrated flavors of currant, plum, mushroom, tar and spice, with a long aftertaste. Enough tannin to hold.

SHAFER Cabernet Sauvignon Stags Leap District 1978 / 92 / \$33
A real mouthful. Shows a rich core of currant and cherry, and the tannins are a bit raw. Youthful for its age, with hints of anise, cedar, sage. Complex aftertaste.

DIAMOND CREEK Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Gravelly Meadow 1978 / 91 / \$100
Earthier than the other DC Cabs, still showing plenty of richness and flavor, with earthy currant, mineral, herb, sage and spice notes. Can hold.

HEITZ Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Martha's Vineyard 1978 / 91 / \$128
Classic Martha's--minty, spicy, elegant and aging exceptionally well. Shows off plenty of flavors, with currant, black cherry, anise, cedar and plum.

MARKHAM Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Yountville Vineyard 1978 / 91 / \$50
Youthful, ripe and fleshy style, aging well. Has fruit flavors, supple tannins, hints of spices and cedar. Complex aftertaste.

SANTA CRUZ MOUNTAIN Cabernet Sauvignon Santa Cruz Mountains Bates Ranch 1978 / 91 / \$30
Big, ripe, dense and chewy, finally mature, achieving balance. Rich, earthy currant, mineral, sage and leather character. Still somewhat tannic.

BEAULIEU VINEYARD Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Georges de Latour Private Reserve 1978 / 90 / \$50
Smooth, ripe and spicy, with complex plum, currant, olive, cedar, tea and cherry flavors, well-integrated tannins. Understated.

CONN CREEK Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Lot 2 1978 / 90 / \$40
Dark and ripe, with plum and berry, hints of anise, cedar, spice. Tannins have softened, there's a hint of oxidation, but altogether complex and enticing.

WILLIAM HILL Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Gold Label 1978 / 90 / \$38
Hill's first, and in many ways finest. Ripe and intense, if a bit past its prime. No longer shows the opulent fruit it did at age 10, but still quite flavorful.

ROBERT MONDAVI Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Reserve 1978 / 90 / \$105
Dark and ripe, with a complex array of mature flavors that echo on the finish.

Shows a measure of restraint and finesse.

STELTZNER Cabernet Sauvignon Stags Leap District 1978 / 90 / \$30

Youthful. Combines ripe fruit with a touch of elegance, showing smooth texture and finishing with firm tannins that give structure. A little heat on the finish.

Right Grape, Right Time

Shafer Vineyards hit pay dirt in Stags Leap in 1978

Twenty years later, John Shafer says it was dumb luck that his first Cabernet Sauvignon—from the great 1978 vintage—turned out so well. "No one's more surprised than me by how well it's aged," he says, with a gentle grin, "especially considering how it was made and who made it."

Credit Shafer with the winemaking. Rustic as it may have been, the results are telling in the wine, which rated 92 points in my recent retrospective tasting (see Top-Scoring chart, page 72), and is still jam-packed with rich, vibrant currant and cherry. It has plush, broad tannins and the kind of depth and complexity that could carry it another two decades.

Credit Shafer, too, for choosing the vineyard site. When he decided to quit the book publishing business in Chicago after 20-plus years to pursue a new career, he researched grape growing. He determined that he wanted to own a hillside property, and when he found an old, run-down vineyard in Napa Valley—in what is now known as the Stags Leap District—he cashed in most of his family's savings and bought the land.

The Shafer family—John, wife Bett and their four children—arrived in Napa in August 1972, a few weeks before harvest.

"I'd started to read articles and books about California wine, and I wanted to be in business for myself," says the white-haired Shafer, now 73 and chairman of his family's winery. "My wife had a little inheritance, I had some stock options, and we bought this property. There was a little, old house on the property and we lived there for a few years. It wasn't lavish. I did a lot of the work myself. All of our equipment was used—used everything. Besides, I wanted to do the work. I got a kick out of working in the vineyard."

Shafer Vineyards spreads over 209 acres, climbing up the hillside at the base of the Stags Leap palisades' rock outcropping in southeastern Napa Valley. The vineyard then was a hodgepodge of varieties—Carignane, Zinfandel, Golden Chasselas—all of which were sold to the Napa Valley Cooperative Winery, which crushed the grapes and sold the wine in bulk.

Once in Napa, Shafer started tasting wine and replanting his vineyard, mostly to Cabernet because of its promise there. "Nathan Fay's '68 Cab was a dynamite wine," Shafer notes. Fay was a neighboring grower with one of the oldest Cabernet vineyards in Stags Leap. His homemade wines were legendary for their suppleness and complexity, and they inspired Shafer.

Shafer had the good fortune to get great Cabernet cuttings with which to replant his vineyard. Unbeknownst to him, his vineyard manager had obtained the Eisele Cabernet clone (by picking up some pruned vines from the Eisele vineyard near Calistoga, now known as Araujo) so about half the vineyard was planted with that clone. Other clones came from equally excellent Cabernet

vineyards in the valley—Spottswoode and Bella Oaks.

The first year after the replanting was a disaster, however. A hole in the deer fence left Shafer's young vines unprotected, and only 20 percent of the grape crop survived the deer attacks. But area winemakers soon started noticing the quality of the grapes. Vintners at Souverain, which was then in Napa Valley, and at Spring Mountain, wanted to lock in long-term contacts to buy Shafer's fruit. But in 1976, neighboring Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, founded in 1972, won the famous "Judgment of Paris" tasting, and owner Warren Winiarski's second vintage, a 1973 Cabernet, was chosen by a panel of French wine experts as the best wine in a blind tasting of highly ranked Bordeaux wines and select California Cabernet Sauvignons.

With that in mind, Shafer couldn't help but think about making his own wine. After a couple of vintages of homemade wine, Shafer focused on 1978, with the aim of making 1,000 cases. He hired a consultant, Larry Wara, bought American oak barrels and made his wine at Round Hill Vineyards. The American oak was straight out of the Bourbon barrel factory, Shafer says, and they were worried that the barrels would give too strong a taste to the wine. So the barrels were treated with water and soda ash. "I soaked them with water out on the driveway and turned them over the next day. The water came out looking like brown coffee," Shafer recalls.

Once in barrel, the '78 wouldn't go through the malolactic (or secondary) fermentation, so Shafer used electric blankets to warm the barrels and encourage malolactic. The wine aged for two-plus years in barrel, and when it came out in 1981 for \$11 a bottle, it was a hit. "A lot of people loved that wine because it had this soft texture," he says. "Everyone wanted to know how much Merlot I'd added, because it was so fleshy." Shafer went on to make a name for himself with Merlot, but the '78 Cab was all Cabernet. With time, Shafer narrowed the focus on Cabernet to the best site on his property, along the sloping hillside now used for the flagship wine, Shafer Hillside Select.

The fleshy, opulent style of Cabernet from Shafer, Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, Steltzner, Clos Du Val, Pine Ridge and others led to lengthy debate about the unique features of the area. After considerable discussion and negotiation, Shafer headed a committee that lobbied the federal government for appellation status, and in 1989 a Stags Leap District was formed.

Many factors make the Stags Leap area unique. It's cooler than Oakville and Rutherford to its north. In the evenings, a cool breeze blows in off the San Pablo Bay. During the day, the sun warms the soils and vines, allowing for steady, uniform ripening. The Cabernets from Stags Leap District tend to be more supple and fruity than those grown farther north, but they age quite well, even when made by novice winemakers like Shafer in '78.

"We get lots of powerful fruit in our wines, and we counterbalance it with 34 months in oak and not have it taste overoaked," says Shafer. Son Doug followed John as winemaker, and now Elias Fernandez is winemaker, as the winery has branched out to embrace Chardonnay, Merlot and Sangiovese.

Still, it's the Hillside Select Cabernet that's the show-stopper. Having tasted vertical selections of the wine on several occasions, the best vintages are 1978, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994 and 1995. The 1997, tasted from barrel, is one of best I've so far tried from that vintage. Clearly, this winery has been on a hot streak with its plush, juicy Cabernets for most of the past two decades. --J.L.

Rating 1978 California Cabernet Sauvignon With Prices Then & Now

WINE / RELEASE PRICE / CURRENT PRICE / PERCENT INCREASE /
CURRENT SCORE

BEAULIEU VINEYARD Georges de Latour / \$19 / \$50 / 163% / 90

BERINGER Napa Valley Private Reserve / \$25 / \$115 / 360% / 92

BUENA VISTA Sonoma Valley Special Selection / \$12 / \$28 / 133% / 88

BURGESS Napa Valley Vintage Selection / \$14 / \$33 / 136% / 89

CAKEBREAD Napa Valley Lot 2 / \$12 / \$33 / 175% / 89

CAYMUS Napa Valley / \$12 / \$61 / 408% / 88

CAYMUS Napa Valley Special Selection / \$30 / \$292 / 873% / 82

CHATEAU MONTELENA Napa Valley / \$16 / \$255 / 800% / 92

CHATEAU ST. JEAN Sonoma Valley Glen Ellen Vineyards / \$17 / \$25 / 47% /
87

CLOS DU BOIS Alexander Valley / \$10 / \$25 / 150% / 78

CLOS DU BOIS Alexander Valley Briarcrest Vineyard / \$15 / \$30 / 100% / 88

CLOS DU BOIS Marlstone Vineyard Alexander Valley / \$16 / \$30 / 88% / 74

CLOS DU VAL Napa Valley Reserve / \$25 / \$48 / 92% / 88

CONN CREEK Napa Valley Lot 1 / \$12 / \$40 / 233% / 87

CONN CREEK Napa Valley Lot 2 / \$13 / \$40 / 207% / 90

DIAMOND CREEK Napa Valley Gravelly Meadow / \$13 / \$100 / 669% / 91

DIAMOND CREEK Napa Valley Lake / \$13 / \$275 / 2,015% / 97

DIAMOND CREEK Napa Valley Red Rock Terrace / \$13 / \$100 / 669% / 96

DIAMOND CREEK Napa Valley Volcanic Hill / \$13 / \$100 / 669% / 93

DUCKHORN Napa Valley / \$11 / \$68 / 518% / 92

FREEMARK ABBEY Napa Valley / \$12 / \$28 / 133% / 89

FREEMARK ABBEY Napa Valley Bosché / \$13 / \$38 / 192% / 85

HEITZ Napa Valley Martha's Vineyard / \$22 / \$128 / 481% / 91

WILLIAM HILL Napa Valley Gold Label / \$16 / \$38 / 138% / 90

JORDAN Alexander Valley / \$16 / \$73 / 356% / 87

KENWOOD Sonoma Valley / \$8 / \$33 / 313% / 87

KENWOOD Sonoma County Artist Series / \$20 / \$113 / 465% / 87

MARKHAM Napa Valley Yountville Vineyard / \$13 / \$50 / 247% / 91

LOUIS M. MARTINI California / \$4 / \$15 / 275% / 78
MAYACAMAS Napa Valley / \$18 / \$82 / 356% / 92
ROBERT MONDAVI Napa Valley / \$12 / \$48 / 300% / 82
ROBERT MONDAVI Napa Valley Reserve / \$40 / \$105 / 163% / 90
MOUNT VEEDER Mount Veeder Sidehill Ranch / \$14 / \$28 / 100% / 88
JOSEPH PHELPS Insignia Napa Valley / \$25 / \$83 / 232% / 93
JOSEPH PHELPS Napa Valley Backus Vineyard / \$17 / \$85 / 400% / 92
JOSEPH PHELPS Napa Valley Eisele Vineyard / \$30 / \$156 / 420% / 94
PINE RIDGE Rutherford / \$8 / \$25 / 213% / 88
RAYMOND Napa Valley / \$10 / \$50 / 400% / 88
RIDGE Santa Cruz Mountain Monte Bello / \$30 / \$125 / 317% / 92
SANTA CRUZ MOUNTAIN Santa Cruz Mountains Bates Ranch / \$12 / \$30 / 150% / 91
SHAFER Stags Leap District / \$11 / \$33 / 200% / 92
SILVER OAK Alexander Valley / \$16 / \$78 / 388% / 86
STAG'S LEAP WINE CELLARS Stags Leap District Cask 23 / \$35 / \$158 / 351% / 88
STELTZNER Stags Leap District / \$14 / \$30 / 114% / 90
STERLING Napa Valley / \$13 / \$25 / 92% / 89

Rating California Cabernet Sauvignon Vintages 1978–1997

1997 / 95-100* / Should be grand, rival '94 for best of decade* / NYR
1996 / 90-94* / Early signs point to ripe, holdflavorful wines* / NYR
1995 / 95 / Rich, complex and flavorful / Hold
1994 / 96 / Ripe, dark, high extract; supple tannins / Hold
1993 / 90 / Variable, some excellent wines / Drink or hold
1992 / 93 / Supple, rich, fruity, with soft tannins / Hold
1991 / 94 / Intense, tannic, age-worthy; best in Napa / Hold
1990 / 95 / Ripe, supple, complex; best in Napa / Drink or hold
1989 / 84 / Austere, tannic; uneven quality / Drink
1988 / 82 / Lean, crisp and mostly simple / Drink
1987 / 96 / Deep, rich, complex, tannic; best in Napa / Drink
1986 / 95 / Fine structure, tight, age-worthy; most are ready / Drink

1985 / 97 / Best of 1980s; elegant, rich, stylish / Drink

1984 / 94 / Rich, fruity, opulent, complex / Drink

1983 / 81 / Lean, tannic; uneven quality / Drink

1982 / 78 / Austere, lean; uneven quality / Drink

1981 / 85 / Supple, charming, balanced / Drink

1980 / 84 / Ripe, firm; fading now / Drink

1979 / 88 / Austere but age-worthy; best are long-lived / Drink

1978 / 93 / Ripe, flavorful, complex; a few greats remain / Drink

* Preliminary analysis based on barrel samples and/or a limited sampling.

Vintage Ratings: 95-100, classic; 90-94, outstanding; 80-89, good to very good; 70-79, average; 60-69, below average; 50-59, poor.

Drinkability: "NYR" means the vintage has not yet been released; "drink" means most of the wines of the vintage are ready to drink; "hold" means most of the age-worthy wines have not yet fully matured. Note: Most California Cabernet can usually be drunk early, within a few years of release.

SOURCE: WINE SPECTATOR

Age-worthy Cabs To Buy Now

Wineries whose new California Cabernets are likely to age for 20 years

While it is still possible to buy 1978 California Cabernet on the auction market at reasonable prices, there are plenty of excellent younger vintages to choose from as well. The best strategy when shopping is to stick with wineries that have a track record for making great Cabernet. It's a smarter approach than trying to pick the new star every year.

Plenty of wineries have come and gone since 1978, but a few have held steady and even refined their styles. What follows are my recommendations for Cabernets to buy today if you intend to age them. Some of these best bets for the years to come are from wineries whose 1978s are still great, while others are the products of wineries that have emerged more recently, in the 1980s or 1990s.

In choosing wines for long-term aging, you should pay more attention to the quality of the vintage overall than to any one wine's specific score or rating, because great wineries usually make great wines in great vintages. With that in mind, buy up wines from the 1990, '91, '92 or '93 vintages if you can, though they are going to be hard to find. Wines from the 1994 vintage will also be tricky to find--unless you've been following my advice to buy in all these years--because 1994 is a tremendous vintage and most of the top wines are already sold out (check for auctions). Both 1995 and 1996 will have excellent

Cabernets, but the next monumental year may be 1997.

LEADERS SINCE (AT LEAST) THE 1970S

BEAULIEU VINEYARD NAPA VALLEY GEORGES DE LATOUR PRIVATE RESERVE

On the upswing again, this Rutherford-grown Cabernet remains one of Napa's most consistent, with ripe, rich, elegant, restrained flavors. New focus on clones and French oak has added even more dimensions. The historic Beaulieu winery has made this wine since 1936.

BERINGER NAPA VALLEY PRIVATE RESERVE

A benchmark for consistency, with highly extracted, potent, deeply flavored, age-worthy wines. A mix of vineyards from Napa Valley. Ed Sbragia makes this wine for publicly traded Beringer.

CAYMUS NAPA VALLEY SPECIAL SELECTION

Long a consistent performer from Rutherford estate grapes, it features a broad, rich tapestry of flavors. Owned by the father-and-son team of Charlie and Chuck Wagner.

CHATEAU MONTELENA NAPA VALLEY

Sleek, tight, tannic and concentrated, never to be counted out. Style is deliberately set for aging, so in its youth it can be hard and unyielding. Almost always gains complexity with six to 10 years of cellaring. The grapes for this wine come from Montelena's vineyards in Calistoga.

DIAMOND CREEK NAPA VALLEY; GRAVELLY MEADOW, RED ROCK TERRACE, VOLCANIC HILL AND LAKE

The three—and sometimes four—different vineyard bottlings are austere and often unyielding when young, but with age these wines consistently gain complexity and hold up well. Owner Al Brounstein has made them some of Napa's most sought-after wines.

HEITZ NAPA VALLEY MARTHA'S VINEYARD

At a crossroads now with the vineyard being replanted, this remains a solid, distinctive, cellar-worthy wine, but it rarely dominates the way it once did; the pack has caught up. Grapes for this wine come from one of Napa's most storied vineyards.

ROBERT MONDAVI NAPA VALLEY RESERVE

Deceptively age-worthy, with its elegance and grace, years of refinement and key Napa vineyard holdings ensure consistently high quality. Winemaker Tim Mondavi continues to uphold his family's rigorous standards.

JOSEPH PHELPS INSIGNIA NAPA VALLEY

Toned-down mintiness and broader, richer currant and berry flavors mark the style. Ages exceptionally well, almost always in the running. A mix of Napa Valley vineyards. A Bordeaux-inspired blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Cabernet Franc.

RIDGE MONTE BELLO SANTA CRUZ MOUNTAINS

Might be California's best Cabernet vineyard, but because it's outside of Napa, it rarely gets the attention it merits. Paul Draper makes this intense and age-worthy wine.

SHAFER STAGS LEAP DISTRICT HILLSIDE SELECT

This vineyard has come on strong in the 1990s, with many deeply flavored Cabernets from one of Napa's best Cabernet districts.

STAG'S LEAP WINE CELLARS CASK 23 NAPA VALLEY

Despite past inconsistencies, this can be among the most dramatic and richly flavored of all Napa Valley Cabernets. This winery, founded in 1972, is owned by Warren and Barbara Winiarski.

NEWCOMERS OF THE 1980S

DOMINUS ESTATE NAPA VALLEY

Château Petrus' Christian Moueix has finally gotten into a groove. Look for 1996 or 1997 to be superior to 1995.

DUNN HOWELL MOUNTAIN

Randy Dunn, who once made wines at Caymus, makes immense Cabernets from mountain-grown grapes.

FORMAN NAPA VALLEY

A reliable if less-glamorous winery; winemaker and owner Ric Forman has a steady, proven hand.

GROTH NAPA VALLEY RESERVE

In great vintages, it rises to the top. Amazing breadth of flavor. Former computer-executive Dennis Groth founded this Oakville winery in 1982.

THE HESS COLLECTION NAPA VALLEY RESERVE

With estate-grown mountain grapes, winemaker Randle Johnson produces dense, backward, age-worthy wines that are also exceptional values.

OPUS ONE NAPA VALLEY

Bordeaux finesse and polish applied to Napa Valley Cabernet. From the joint venture of the Mondavi family and the Rothschilds of Château Mouton-Rothschild.

SILVERADO VINEYARDS NAPA VALLEY LIMITED RESERVE

The best lots of Cabernet from estate vineyards in Stags Leap go into this bottling in the top years. Owned by the family of the late Walt Disney.

SPOTTSWOODE NAPA VALLEY

A steady, reliable style that ages well. Owner Mary Novak's vineyard is located in the town of St. Helena.

STARS OF THE 1990S

ARAUJO NAPA VALLEY EISELE VINEYARD

This vineyard is well-known for grand wines under Phelps. Current owners Bart and Daphne Araujo are challenging the best wines of the past.

BRYANT FAMILY NAPA VALLEY

A newcomer to be sure, but shows immense flavor and concentration. Its grapes come from a 10-acre, hillside vineyard.

DALLA VALLE NAPA VALLEY AND MAYA

Get whatever you can—the potent Cabernet Sauvignon or the Cabernet Franc-Cabernet Sauvignon blend called Maya. From hillside vineyards on the east side of Napa Valley.

FLORA SPRINGS RUTHERFORD RESERVE

Brilliant winemaking in the 1990s erases the inconsistencies of the 1980s. Underappreciated.

HARLAN ESTATE NAPA VALLEY

Dense, concentrated fruit flavors with a sense of elegance and finesse. Owned by San Francisco real estate developer Bill Harlan.

STAGLIN FAMILY RUTHERFORD

A sleeper, as quality continues to rise from a parcel once used by Beaulieu Vineyards.

VIADER NAPA VALLEY

This winery at the base of Howell Mountain uses Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc. Its wines are deftly balanced and polished. --J.L.

The Not So Great '88s

Poor weather led to a lean, tannic vintage of merely good California Cabernets

By James Laube

Jeff Emery of Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard looked up the 1988 vintage in the winery diary. The entry read: "Worst looking fruit I've ever seen; raisins, dehydrated (grapes)... . We ended up picking because the fruit was falling apart, rather than waiting for any particular sugar level or taste."

Even with two sweeps through the vineyard to pick the best grapes, the wines were only mediocre to good. "In retrospect, what we should have done was throw away the wine from the first picking and kept only the second."

With all the great Cabernet vintages coming out of California the past few years, you'd think that Cabernet is the can't-miss grape. Well, it can miss, and 1988 reminds us of what can happen when things go wrong.

Most vintners blame a poor spring grape set, the result of bad weather, for the uniformly crisp, lean and tannic 1988 Cabernets. The 1988 growing season was marred by unseasonable heat followed by unseasonable coolness, and suffered also from drought, then some rain at harvest. "Late March saw temperatures rise into the 90s, where they stayed until late April," recalls Warren Winiarski of Stag's Leap Wine Cellars. Then the weather turned unusually cool, with overcast days, chilly nights and even hail in some North Coast vineyards.

All this added up to poor conditions for the grape set (the formation of grape berries) and damage, or shatter, to the young fruit. If spring had given vintners a good grape set, the subsequent drought and harvest time rain would have been minor annoyances. A bad grape set and shatter result in uneven ripening, oftentimes small and immature berries and, worse yet, lean, angular wines.

Not surprisingly, only one wine out of the 76 tasted in this 10-year retrospective earned an outstanding score--Philip Togni's from Napa Valley (90 points)--and even it is a bit curious with its chunky fruit flavors and exotic spiciness. What makes this wine outstanding is its concentration.

Another handful of wines just missed: Diamond Creek Red Rock Terrace (89), Dunn Howell Mountain (89) and Shafer Hillside Select (89) all show more depth and richness than the pack. Arrowood, Cafaro, Mondavi Reserve, Caymus Special Selection, Chateau Montelena, Duckhorn and others each scored 88 points, while another dozen are appealing wines--especially if you like Cabernet on the austere side. In fact, I can't remember a California Cabernet vintage that

produced only one outstanding wine, yet so many good to very good ones.

Curiously, most of my scores are in the 83-to 87-point range. Wines that fall into that range are considered good to very good. But they're often wines that are difficult to judge because when tasting them you have to determine what's missing that keeps them from being outstanding.

To their credit, the 1988 Cabernets were at their best when they were released, in early 1990s. Even then, at their fruitiest, they showed a weak midpalate and only modest depth and richness. But the fruit flavors they had were bright and youthful.

Now at age 10, these wines are a shade past maturity and most are drying out. Their tannins are noticeably firm and earthy, a warning sign that they're likely to dry out even further within the next few years, and thus be even less compelling to drink.

For sure, the 1988s were poor choices to cellar beyond a few years. I was never much impressed with these Cabernets and recommended you buy cautiously, if at all. More importantly, if you did buy, I recommended you enjoy the wines in their youth. It was evident early on that the 1988s weren't going anywhere. They were nowhere near as interesting as the 1985s, 1986s or 1987s, good candidates for both early drinking and cellaring.

For collectors, not much of a market ever developed for the 1988s because of their ordinary quality. The wines that sell at auction now are considered "relative bargains," says Bruce Kaiser of Butterfield, Butterfield & Dunning, a fine wine auction house in San Francisco. "The vintage got whopped by the ugly stick as a bad vintage," says Kaiser. Most 1988s sell for about half the price of the 1985s, '86s or '87s.

This is not to say that there aren't a few customers interested in the 1988s. According to Kaiser: "People who are starting a new restaurant can buy '88s and offer them as mature Cabernets on their wine lists." And, because their prices are less than those of most new releases, not to mention those of some other mature vintages, they are comparative bargains.

For most of us, though, the lesson is simple. Most California Cabernets drink well on release and for 10 to 15 years. The greatest wines from the greatest vintages often age well beyond 15 or 20 years. But in lesser years, it's best to drink the wines young and enjoy them for what they are. In that sense, 1988 is a classic example of a vintage that needed drinking four or five years ago. Maybe even earlier.

James Laube's Top-Scoring 1988 California Cabernet Sauvignons

WINE / SCORE / PRICE

PHILIP TOGNI Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1988 / 90 / \$60
Wine of the vintage? Has more ripeness, richness, depth, detail and concentration than any other in this tasting. Best of all, the finish is rich, focused and complex.

DIAMOND CREEK Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Red Rock Terrace 1988 / 89 / \$65

Comparatively good depth and flavor. Well balanced, it's one of the few '88s that may have a future. Finishes with ripe, well-integrated tannins.

DUNN Cabernet Sauvignon Howell Mountain 1988 / 89 / \$85

Among the best in depth, richness, concentration, complexity and length, with typical Dunn Howell Mountain flavors. Finishes with chewy tannins and the fruit to match.

SHAFER Cabernet Sauvignon Stags Leap District Hillside Select 1988 / 89 / \$50

Deep, rich and complex, with a supple array of spicy fruit flavors and smooth, polished tannins. Gains on the finish, picking up chocolate and vanilla.

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