

# Wine Spectator

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## These Cabernets Make Cents

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Issue: October 15, 2000

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By James Laube

As it relates to wine, value is always best understood as a sliding scale. These days you hear people talk about \$50 or \$60 as good deals for a bottle of classified-growth Bordeaux. Many of the top California reds, Rhône stars, super Tuscans and Australian gems -- even those with decent production and import numbers -- often sell in that range and upward (that is, when you can find them).

The challenge here is to stretch your dollars. It's easy to overspend on wine, so this list of Cabernets is dedicated to real value, with the goal of spending \$30 or less per bottle. At these prices, you should try to buy at least six bottles or a case. There's no better way to get to know a wine than to drink it on several occasions as it matures. It's also worth having a stash if you're having a big dinner party and want to uncork a second or third bottle.

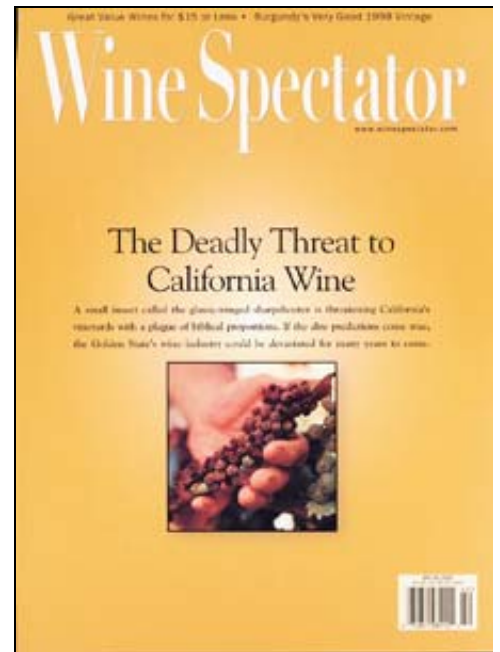
Two themes emerged while assembling this list. First, don't overlook longtime "old economy" producers. They know how the market swings, and they want to keep their wines affordably priced. Second, newcomers with no track record or market following often use price as their lure.

A. Rafanelli Dry Creek Valley 1997 (92 points, \$28) Year in and year out, this rich, earthy, authentic, estate-grown Cabernet from northern Sonoma is dense and age-worthy.

Raymond Napa Valley Reserve 1998 (92, \$28) If all the 1998s end up being this good, I'll be eating a lot of my words about the vintage. Old-timers Walt Raymond and Roy Raymond Jr. quietly prove their Cabernet mastery time and again.

Stonehedge Napa Valley 1997 (92, \$20) A gigantic crop in 1997 led to lots of extra wine that didn't fit into regular blends, and this winery was able to tap into some really great juice.

Byington Santa Cruz Mountains Bates Ranch Vineyard 1997 (91, \$24) Bates Ranch has long served Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard winery well, so it's no surprise that Byington's got a hit, too.



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Fife Napa Valley 1997 (91, \$28) Dennis Fife, another experienced pro, makes lots of hearty reds while keeping his finger on the market's price pulse.

Freemark Abbey Napa Valley 1997 (91, \$26) This winery, one of the most underappreciated Cabernet producers around, can use grapes not destined for its single-vineyard Bosché and Sycamore bottlings, as well as from other long-term vineyard sources.

Guenoc North Coast 1997 (91, \$17) Best deal here. Notice the appellation -- these grapes come from Napa, Lake, Sonoma and Mendocino counties.

Kendall-Jackson California Grand Reserve 1997 (91, \$30) Here's an unusual turn of events: The '96 bottling (90, \$74) yielded 6,500 cases, while the '97, a better wine, yielded only 4,000 cases -- at less than half the price. As K-J's Artisans & Estates winery group introduces new lines of vineyard-designated wines from Napa Valley, it needs to separate its brands by price, too.

Monticello Napa Valley Jefferson Cuvée (91, \$25) Inconsistency has been the winery's shortcoming, but this bottling speaks loudly and clearly of quality.

Rutherford Grove Napa Valley 1996 (91, \$28) Ray Courson of Elise is involved with the winemaking, accounting for its success.

Stonegate Napa Valley 1997 (91, \$25) After sinking off the charts with spotty wines, Stonegate's made a revival that merits a fresh look.

Dover Canyon Ménage Paso Robles 1996 (90, \$28) A breakthrough Cabernet blend that shows all kinds of possibilities for this area. Make a note to look for the '97.

Silverado Vineyards Napa Valley 1997 (90, \$30) The heirs of Walt Disney who own the winery also have a magic kingdom of vineyard holdings. Add to that Jack Stuart's expertise in winemaking, and here's a winner.

St. Clement Napa Valley 1996 (90, \$30) A steady, reliable producer of understated wines. This version was overseen by Dennis Johns.

You'll be hearing and reading a lot about the 1997 Cabernets in the next few months, and a lot of the hoopla will be focused on the highest-rated and most expensive wines. Join the hunt for the elite, but make sure you put a few of these wines in your cellar. Reward yourself for being a shrewd buyer.

James Laube's new edition of Wine Spectator's California Wine is now available.

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