

101 Best Wineries in America for 2015

Identifying what we believe to be the 101 best wineries in the United States was an extremely challenging mission. The sheer quantity and variety of good and great wine being made in this country has grown exponentially in the past two or three decades. Wine is now produced in all 50 states — though admittedly Alaska's offerings are mostly made from fruits and berries, plus grape juice imported from more temperate climes — and almost every state has at least a few, if not a carload, of examples well worth drinking.

This ranking isn't a beauty contest, giving points for attractive settings or handsome architecture, or a guide to fine winery dining. Elsewhere, we've included some American wineries in our lists of Wineries Worth Visiting and Best Winery Restaurants, and identified Napa Valley's Best Wineries for a View, but here — while some of the places listed do indeed offer visual or gustatory attractions — we're concerned with what gets put into the bottle and poured into our glass.

The wineries on our list were nominated by experts in the field — sommeliers, wine writers, chefs, and restaurateurs, along with wine-savvy editors at *The Daily Meal*. These included (some respondents prefer to remain anonymous) regular wine writers for *The Daily Meal* like Roger Morris, Gabe Sasso, and Andrew Chalk; John Tilson of *The Underground Wine Letter*; wine writer and wine bar proprietor Keith Beavers; chef–restaurateur Daniel Boulud and Daniel Johannes, corporate wine director for Boulud's Dinex Group; chef–restaurateur and *Daily Meal* contributor Norman Van Aken; sommelier, wine educator, and wine blogger Elizabeth Schneider; Cathy Mantuano, wine director at the Chicago Art Institute's Terzo Piano; and Julian Mayor, head sommelier at Bourbon Steak in the Washington, D.C., Four Seasons Hotel.

Where possible, we factored in our own tasting notes of recent vintages; we also consulted the leading wine publications and newsletters and considered recent awards from prestigious competitions.

We considered not just individual wines, though, but the overall place of each winery in the American wine scene. Is it a dependable veteran, tried and true? An audacious innovator? Does it specialize in just one or two grape varieties, or do a sterling job with 20? Is it representative of its corner of the wine country? Does it help, in one way or another, enhance the reputation of its region, and/or of American wine in general?

We also factored in quality-to-price ratio. While this wasn't our principal criterion, we did feel that value should be considered in our ranking strategy. Value doesn't necessarily mean low price, of course, so there are some producers of pricey wines represented here. But our consideration of value accounts in part for the absence from our list of some of famous "trophy wines" from the Napa Valley and elsewhere, wines priced at many hundreds of dollars on release and bought more often (we're pretty sure) as status symbols rather than as delicious things to savor — though it is also worth noting that our panel didn't vote for some of the most famous names at all.

In the nomination process, we asked our panel to consider not just

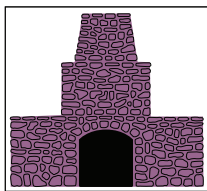
the obvious places — California, the Pacific Northwest, New York State — but the entire country. The vast majority of our choices, about two-thirds of the wineries listed, did turn out to be Californian; as noted, plenty of other places are doing a good job with wine, but the Golden State is still by far the largest producing state and still boasts the largest number of great wineries. The Pacific Northwest (Idaho included) is well-represented too, though, and you'll find wineries from New York (both the Finger Lakes and Long Island), Virginia, Texas, Maryland, Colorado, New Mexico, Michigan, and Pennsylvania among our top 101.

We've included wineries from less prominent wine regions for two reasons: first, because we want to encourage the production of fine wine anywhere it can be managed (which, it turns out, is apparently in a whole lot of places); but also because producers who have to use their imaginations a little more than usual, to deal with the growing conditions unique to their regions, often

come up with wines that are quite delicious but don't taste quite like anybody else's. Va La Vineyards (No. 85) in Pennsylvania, for instance, produces small batches of critically acclaimed wines from unusual blends of grapes "chosen by the soil." Inwood Estates Vineyards (No. 75), just north of Austin, Texas, has led that state's winemakers in discovering that Spain's essential tempranillo grape makes superb wines, neither Spanish nor Californian in character, in the Lone Star State. Northern Virginia's Linden Vineyards (No. 15) uses French varieties both well-known and less so, and French-American hybrids, to makes wines of great originality. Of course, many of the big names from California and the Pacific Northwest are represented here, too — Robert Mondavi Winery (No. 69), The Eyrle Vineyards (No. 38), Heitz Cellars (No. 7), and so on — as are small but increasingly important producers from those places, like Saxum Vineyards (No. 51) from Paso Robles, and Andrew Will Winery (No. 22) from Vashon, Washington. We want to represent many parts of the country in this list, but we also need to acknowledge that the vast majority of America's best wines come from the West Coast.

#4 Calera Wine, Hollister, Calif.

Think you know California pinot noir? Think again. The only winery located in the Mount Harlan AVA of California's Central Coast, Calera was one of the first modern-day wineries to plant pinot noir in the state, after winemaker Josh Jensen found a high-elevation, cool-climate location with soil rich in limestone. His pinots show Burgundian influences, balancing richness and elegance. Robert Parker, the most influential of wine critics, called Calera one of the most "compelling" pinot noir specialists "of not only the New World, but of Planet Earth." Calera has also produced chardonnay, viognier, and aligoté at their 100-percent gravity-flow winery, and these are hardly to be ignored. John Tilson of *The Underground Wine Letter* salutes the winery's "consistently superb wines over its entire history and strong advocacy of traditional winemaking." Works for us. — *Colman Andrews*



CALERA