

California's Top 25 Wines

The California wine universe is too huge and daunting to cover comprehensively. It's foolish for anyone, even those with much more experience, a bigger travel budget and more tasting time than me, to make sweeping conclusions about the latest trends taking place in the roughly 130 designated viticultural areas of this vast and grape-crazy state.

Nevertheless, I noticed some tendencies strengthening this year as I swirled, sniffed, sipped and spit my way through several hundred bottles of California wine and traveled up and down the state.

1. More rule-breaking blends: Artisanal winemakers, especially on the Central Coast, are crossing traditional boundaries more frequently in their red (and less frequently white) blends. You'll find varieties from Bordeaux, Burgundy and the Rhône thrown together; zinfandel and other Italian and even Spanish varieties are sometimes added to the mix.

2. Fewer fruit bombs, more balance: Younger winemakers in particular are harvesting their grapes slightly less ripe, keeping alcohol levels lower, and eschewing manipulation once the grapes have been squeezed. The result is wine that is less fruit-forward and showy but more balanced, complex, individualized, food-friendly and age-worthy.

3. The rise (and rise and rise) of pinot noir: Once a light, mid-priced alternative for cabernet haters, California pinot from Anderson Valley, Sonoma, Russian River, Santa Lucia Highlands, Santa Rita Hills and many other cool-climate AVAs is flooding the market, yet prices are reaching Napa cabernet level: \$50, \$60, \$70...Yikes. And it's getting heavier and more extracted, too.

4. Rosé is here to stay: The French started it, but California winemakers have embraced the summer pink wine tradition wholeheartedly. The domestic version is often a tad sweeter than bone-dry Provencal rosé, and many winemakers depart from the customary Rhône varieties to make rosé from pinot noir and other non-Rhône grapes.

5. Unusual grapes are appearing: Chenin blanc, which has all but disappeared in California, was a surprise hit for artisanal Central Coast winemaker Andrew Jones of Field Recordings. Others winemakers are finding a market for such un-California grapes as vermentino, tannat, alicante bouschet, fiano and valdiguié.

6. Paso Robles is a respectable (dare we say world-class?) producer of Bordeaux: In September, Wine Advocate graced Paso winemakers with impressive scores, including 98 points for Daou Vineyards' 2013 Patrimony and 96 points for its 2013 Soul of a Lion. Yet Paso's best are not Napa clones: they have softer tannins, their own distinct terroir, and often much more petit verdot in the blend. And they're less expensive than Napa cabs, too.



Calera 2013 Jensen Vineyard Mt. Harlan Pinot Noir:

Tucked away in a mountaintop vineyard in the Gabilan Mountain range not far from Monterey, winemaker Mike Waller quietly proves, year after year, he's one of California's masters of pinot noir. This one is delicately elegant, with red cherry fruit and the fennel quality of the region. I suspect Waller makes one of the state's few age-worthy California pinots.