

Wine Spectator

Sonoma Cabernet Sauvignon

Tim Fish

Issue: June 15, 2016

Sonoma County has a long history of growing Cabernet Sauvignon, although many consumers may be more familiar with versions from Napa Valley, to the east. Cabernet was among the grapevines imported into California in 1862 by Agoston Haraszthy, founder of Buena Vista Winery in Sonoma Valley. While Napa's Inglenook was bottling varietal Cabernet as early as 1882, Sonoma producers typically blended the grape into wines with names such as Claret, often dispensed into jugs for consumers to carry home.

By the early 1970s, pioneering winemaker Rodney Strong was planting Cabernet Sauvignon in Sonoma's Alexander Valley, while Beringer was doing the same in nearby Knights Valley. Chateau St. Jean made its first Cabernet in 1975, using Sonoma Valley fruit. Today, the Alexander, Knights and Sonoma valleys remain the best regions for Cabernet in the county, where a total of 12,000 acres of the variety is currently planted.

Sonoma Cabernet is distinct from Napa Cabernet, displaying a winning style all its own. The climate is generally milder, making for leaner, less powerful, more elegant wines, compared to those from Napa. However, in recent years, more Cabernet has been planted in the mountains above Alexander and Knights valleys, and those wines show that Sonoma can make Cabernets with more density, tannins and richness.

In terms of wine touring, focus your excursions on two areas: Alexander Valley and Sonoma Valley, where you'll find a concentration of wineries and services for visitors. There is only one winery in farther-flung Knights Valley, Peter Michael, and it is open to mailing-list customers only.

TOP SONOMA CABERNETS TO TRY NOW

Wine	Score
CHATEAU ST. JEAN	
Cabernet Sauvignon Alexander Valley 2012	91
Cinq Cépages Sonoma County 2012	90
KINSELLA	
Cabernet Sauvignon Dry Creek Valley Jersey Boys Vineyard 2013	92
Cabernet Sauvignon Dry Creek Valley Spencer Vineyard 2013	90
PETER MICHAEL	
Les Pavots Knights Valley 2012	95
PRIDE	
Claret Reserve Sonoma-Napa Counties 2012	93
Cabernet Sauvignon Sonoma-Napa Counties Reserve 2012	93
RODNEY STRONG	
Cabernet Sauvignon Alexander Valley Rockaway Single Vineyard 2012	94
Cabernet Sauvignon Alexander Valley Brothers Ridge Single Vineyard 2010	91