

WINE 101 – Cabernet Sauvignon ...from Napa and Sonoma

This is the second article in the series WINE 101. Click [HERE](#) to read the first article. Click [HERE](#) to review the wine terms used in this article.

Some would say Cabernet Sauvignon is the most Noble of all wine grapes. Who am I to argue? ...it sure makes some of the world's best wines. Cabernet Sauvignon is the dominate grape of red French Bordeaux's and the Napa and Sonoma Valley Cabs. Same grape, but vastly different wines!

Let's start with Napa and Sonoma. This great wine producing area, located about 75 miles northeast of San Francisco, produces some of the world's best wine. Its fame is largely due to Robert Mondavi's passion for the area and its potential to produce world class wines. The growing region, for example Napa or Sonoma, is often referred to as the wine's "APPELLATION" Appellation is a French term used to certify that the wine was produced in a certain region of France. Other countries use different terms, but "APPELLATION" has become a universal term so I'll use it for every country just to keep it simple. Well, sort of simple ...there are also sub growing regions or sub "APPELLATIONS". For example, sub regions of Napa include St. Helena and Yountville. All this really means is that the wine was produced in or around the town of St. Helena or Yountville. In California, the sub "APPELLATIONS" are not too important. In France, on the other hand, different sub "APPELLATIONS" produce very different wines. More about France in a later article.

Characteristics of California Cabs

The best California Cabs are "BIG", somewhat "EARTHY", somewhat "TANNIC" and well "BALANCED". They are powerful, memorable, and "BODIED". These wines pair well with hearty meats, stronger flavorful cheese like cheddar or Gruyere, and foods seasoned with stronger herbs like rosemary and thyme. Their color is dark red to purple and they tend to be very opaque. Always serve Cabernet Sauvignon at cellar temperature (about 65 degrees F). No wine cooler? Okay, store in the coolest part of your home. "BIG" Cabs can be enjoyed anytime, but especially on a fall or winter day in front of a roaring fire with crusty bread and flavorful cheeses!

Blends of Cabernet Sauvignon often produce wines reminiscent of French Bordeaux's by adding Merlot and other grapes varieties which soften and make the wine more "ELEGANT" with a little less body. These wines require less bottle aging since the Merlot and other grapes reduce the impact of "TANNINS". You can drink them young, but they will also improve with age. California blends are called Meritage to avoid the legally protected Bordeaux "APPELLATION". A good Meritage can hold its own against great Bordeaux.

The Wine Glass

The glass matters! It's part of the overall experience. Cabernet Sauvignon should be served in a large bowl glass. This exposes more of the wine to air helping to oxidize the "TANNINS" which smoothes out the wine. The large bowl also allows more aromas to escape ...improving the wine's "NOSE". Finally, the shape of a Cab glass presents the wine to the optimum position of the mouth for the best overall sensory experience. The thinner the glass the better.

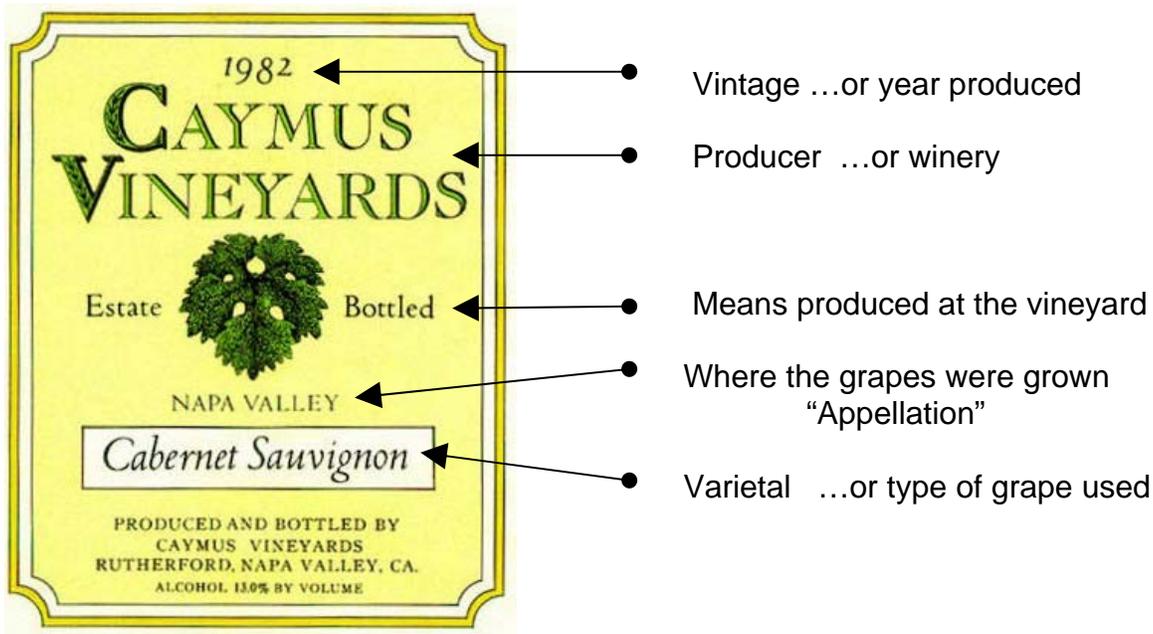


At least that's the theory. Actually, I think, the proper glass helps, but it won't make a bad wine good or a good wine bad. It's fine tuning!

Napa and Sonoma Producers

Some of the better known quality Napa and Sonoma producers, in my opinion and in no order, are: Jordan, Kenwood, Ravenswood, Beringer, Cakebread, Caymus, Coppola, Raymond, Robert Mondavi, Opus One, Trefethen, Ridge, Far Niente, and Silver Oak. The list is far from complete and is just intended to help you recognize some of the quality producers.

The US varietal label is straightforward. Here's an example:



The bottle label for blended wines deviates from the Cabernet Sauvignon label by replacing the varietal with the word Meritage or simply saying the wine is a blend. The grapes in the blend are usually listed on the back label.

Some Wines to Consider

There are hundreds of options. I usually opt for products from one of the well known quality producers. They got there for a reason ...and seldom disappoint.

Most of the top producers offer products in a variety of price ranges. Price is not always the best criteria, but it's a good hint. I'm going to suggest wines in three categories: GREAT (best of the best), EXCEPTIONAL, and GREAT VALUE.

GREAT

- Robert Mondavi Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve 2005
\$90 at Costco

EXCEPTIONAL

- Louis M Martini Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve 2005
\$18 at Costco
(...careful, they also make a Sonoma Valley Cab – good, but not exceptional)

GREAT VALUE

- Francis Coppola Black Label Claret 2005 (Diamond Collection)
\$13 – this is a Cab based blend. Claret is the British term for a Bordeaux style blend.

Where to Purchase

In the Northern Neck I usually have the best luck at:

- The River Market, White Stone
- White Stone Wine and Cheese, and at times
- Kelsick Garden II, Kilmarnock

In Richmond

- Kroger on Cary Street – large selection and very good prices
- Costco – limited selection, but great prices

The Internet

A Google search on the name of the wine will return numerous on-line sources. Compare the prices and shipping cost. This is a very convenient and economical way to purchase wine ...especially if the local merchants do not carry or have difficulty ordering the wine you want!