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Decanter

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you'll want to try**

Crus bourgeois 2010

**'A very positive tasting'
says Steven Spurrier**

White Burgundy 2011
**'Elegance and purity over
power and concentration'**

Californian Cabernets
**Rating the 2009 vintage
from Napa and Sonoma**



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this
month*

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Restaurant of the Year
Travel: Central Loire
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Napa & Sonoma Cabernet 2009

Growers who held their nerve and harvested after October rains were rewarded, says Linda Murphy, who finds there is still imbalances between these neighbouring regions

DECANTER'S TASTING OF 2009 Californian Cabernet Sauvignon drilled down to the state's two most prominent regions for the variety, Napa Valley and Sonoma County. Cabernet Sauvignon grows throughout California – some 32,000ha worth – yet it is in Napa (7,885ha) and Sonoma (4,654ha), the Hollywood and Beverley Hills of the wine scene, where the vast majority of stars reside.

Napa, of course, has all the cachet. Sonoma, Napa's neighbour on the west side of the Mayacamas Range, has success that Napa has been unable to beat in the production of Zinfandel, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, but none of Napa's Cabernet Sauvignon charisma; and yet its Cabs can be sneakily good, and they're getting better.

Sonoma County wineries also don't seem to have the same devotion to *Decanter* Cab tastings as do the Napaans, and that's a shame. It's also understandable, as few Sonoma producers at top Cabernet level export their bottles (Peter Michael is an obvious exception, and Kendall-Jackson is stepping up its UK export efforts). Sonomans are more laid back about such things, although competition is convincing growing numbers of them to sell their wines abroad, and be seen in *Decanter*.

Dollar divide

Pricing is a common divide between Napa and Sonoma Cabernets: a \$100 Napa Cab is typical, a \$100 Sonoma one a rarity. Sonoma doesn't have a Harlan, Bryant Family or Screaming Eagle to push prices well past the \$600 mark – which can be a good or a bad thing, depending on one's view – and grape prices (usually reflected in the final bottle price) are stupendously higher in Napa. The 2011 average price per ton of Cabernet Sauvignon grown in Napa County was £2,800, and the highest was £18,752. Sonoma averaged £1,717 per ton, with a top price of £4,050.

The 2009 vintage for Napa/Sonoma Cabernet Sauvignon was cool for these generally warm regions, and June was downright cold. But the fate of the harvest came down to one decision: whether to harvest not-quite-ripe grapes before an approaching mid-October rainstorm, or cross fingers that the sun would come out after the storm, allowing grapes to dry out and complete the maturation process. The latter did indeed occur, and winemakers who had the patience (and past rain experience) produced some beautiful, complex wines. Those who jumped the gun found themselves with underripe fruit and green wines.

The late storm triggered some mould, although the most accomplished wineries sorted out the infected fruit before fermentation. This reduced yields, but was crucial.



Sonoma-based Linda Murphy is a freelance wine writer and former wine editor of the San Francisco Chronicle

Napa & Sonoma Cabs: know your vintages

2010 Cool year with good wines from diligent producers.

2009 Balanced wines made by those who waited out the rain, and sorted meticulously.

2008 Rollercoaster weather. Reduced yields gave concentrated yet elegant wines.

2007 Wines with more freshness and lower alcohols than the previous three years.

2006 Very tannic vintage, with many wines still backward. Cellar these until 2016.

2005 Thin, bland wines for some, but those who managed yields were rewarded. Drink or hold.

2004 Most wines are alcoholic and sweet, with some exceptions.

2003 Many full-bodied wines, though acid retention was difficult. Drink 2013–2020.

2002 Lush fruit and a hefty punch; enough structure to hold until 2015 before fading.

2001 Ripe, opulent wines were the norm. Drink now.

Napa & Sonoma Cabs: the facts

- Planted hectares** Napa 7,885ha; Sonoma 4,654ha (California total: 32,389ha)

Strongest appellations, Napa: Calistoga, Diamond Mountain, Howell Mountain, Oakville, Rutherford, Spring Mountain, Stags Leap District, St Helena,
- Yountville. **Sonoma:** Alexander Valley, Dry Creek Valley, Sonoma Valley, Sonoma Mountain (Sonoma County)

Appellations to watch, Napa: Coombsville. **Sonoma:** Pine Mountain-Cloverdale Peak

The results

High alcohols and uneven quality in the generic-level wines marred what was otherwise a fine tasting, with our experts recommending most wines for good medium-term drinking. Tina Gellie reports

A SOLID AND enjoyable tasting, according to our experts, showing off what California's premium Cabernet regions do best – but also highlighting their low points.

‘Wines in the modern idiom,’ remarked David Motion. ‘Very juicy, concentrated and clean. There was a lot of oak – sometimes unwelcome – and a lot of alcohol.’ Given the growing conditions, Stephen Brook was happy not to find dilution or rot, but while he was encouraged by some very good wines, ‘it was inconsistent; there were poor ones too’.

The main complaint was high alcohol. For Brook it was ‘a real defect’ in otherwise good wines. ‘There’s no reason, even in Napa and even with global warming, to have 15.5% or 15.8%. Some wines stated they had 14.2% or 14.3% [tasters are told the alcohol] but they weren’t in balance, because the Californians are allowed to lie about alcohols.’

There is a 1.5% legal tolerance in California, so 15% on the label can mean anything from 13.5% to 16.5%. Brook said: ‘In my view that’s unethical. It explains why some wines don’t look that alcoholic on paper but knock you over when you taste them. It’s a huge drawback, and it applied to some of the more expensive wines. In all other respects the wine was terrific; I just don’t want that alcohol

‘The highlight was the centre of Napa: Oakville, Stags Leap & Howell Mountain’ **Yohann Jousselin MS**

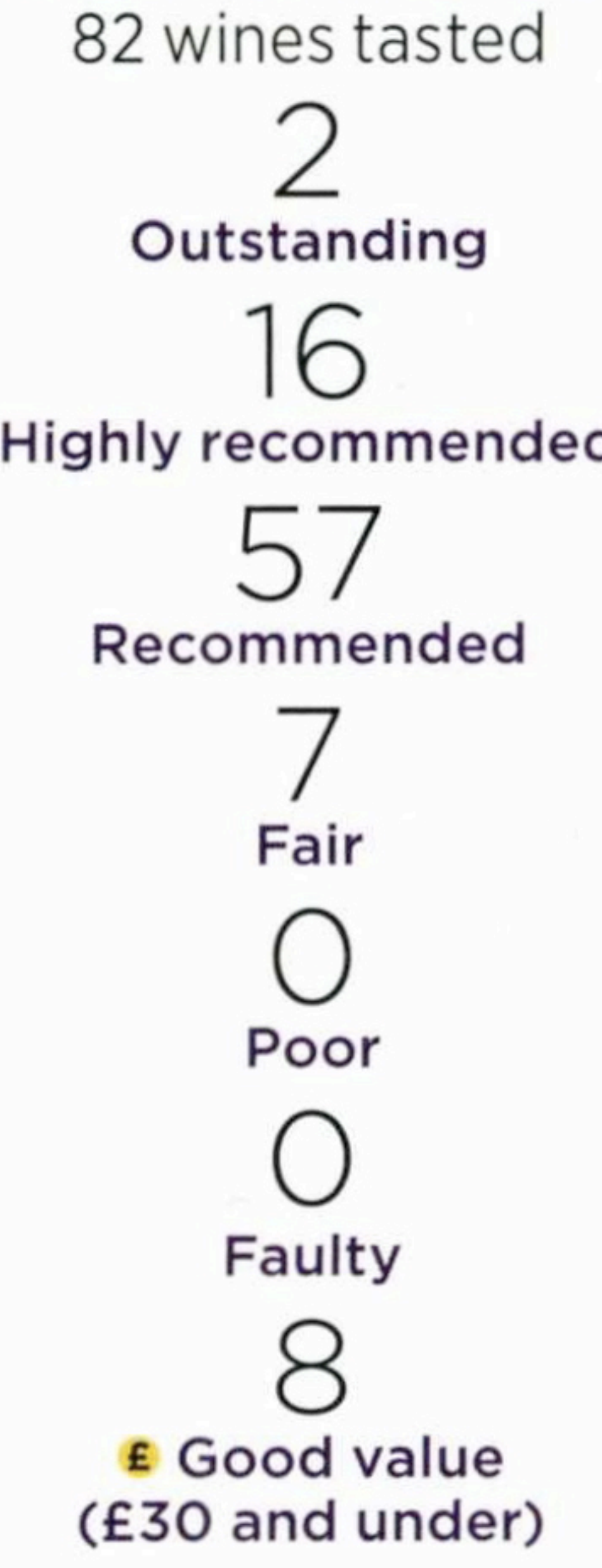
burn – it wrecks the wine. If I want Port I’ll go out and buy Port. It will cost me less and give me as much pleasure.’

In terms of the generic wines (blends from across the region), Brook noted angular acidity and a lack of fruit in Sonoma County but found many in Napa ‘a major disappointment... unbalanced, jammy, low in acidity and lacking freshness, which is essential when you’ve got that intensity of fruit’.

Motion pointed out that generic Napa included cheaper bottlings as well as more serious ones. Yohann Jousselin reckoned ‘you can find great generic Napa Cab at £10 to £12 a bottle’, but Motion and Brook weren’t so sure. ‘You could end up with something fairly horrific,’ said Brook.

When it came to specific AVAs, opinions were more positive. ‘Everything went up a gear,’ said Motion. ‘The

The scores



The tasters’ verdicts

Stephen Brook



Stephen Brook has been a contributing editor to Decanter since 1996. Brook has won a clutch of awards for his writing on wine, and is the author of more than 30 books, including Complete Bordeaux, now the definitive study of the region, and The Wines of California, which won three awards. Brook also fully revised the last two editions of Hugh Johnson’s Wine Companion, and he writes for magazines in many countries.

Brook’s verdict

‘With more than 600 wines bearing the Napa appellation, and a few hundred more with Sonoma on the label, it’s not easy to get an overview of the vintage even after 82 wines. For the most part they were balanced. ‘There were disappointments among the generic wines, for the obvious reason that they encompass both very serious wines from important producers and commercial bottlings from larger companies. Most of the best were in the individual AVAs, with Alexander Valley, as so often, showing well in Sonoma, and all in Napa displaying individuality and quality. ‘Excellent though many of the Sonoma wines were, it was Napa that demonstrated the grandeur and splendour of Cabernet Sauvignon. There were magnificent wines, and my average scores were high: this is a vintage that can be bought with confidence. Sub-regional typicity is hard to pin down, with only Stags Leap standing apart with discernibly elegant, balanced wines. Some acidities seemed low, and this may not be a vintage for the long haul. And the curse of deliberately overripe, wildly alcoholic wines continues to dog Napa Cabernets.’

Yohann Jousselin MS



Yohann Jousselin MS was until recently head sommelier at The Vineyard at Stockcross, Decanter’s 2012 Restaurant of the Year (see p84). Responsible there for a cellar comprising over 30,000 bottles, many Californian, he was voted Chaine des Rotisseurs’ Young International Sommelier of the Year in 2009 and Piper Heidsieck’s UK Sommelier of the Year in 2011.

Jousselin’s verdict

‘A great tasting; I really enjoyed the diversity of the vintage. I first tasted 2009 last year in Napa, and at the time I was already very impressed by the balance of most of the wines. Today’s tasting was very difficult as there were many wines with a high concentration of ripeness. I like 2009 as an overall vintage but I do think that the best wines are those with higher acidity. ‘Unfortunately, the wines from Sonoma were not showing as well as expected. Most of them were very closed and had alcohol levels that were slightly too high. I think those will need a bit more time before they are ready to show well. The generic Napa wines were very consistent in quality and showed a great potential for ageing. But the highlights of the day for me were the wines from the northern part of the Napa Valley, especially Diamond Mountain and Howell Mountain. Those wines showed greater complexity and elegance. ‘This tasting has confirmed my opinion of the vintage. Cabernet Sauvignon from Napa in 2009 has a high potential for ageing; the wines are rich and opulent. I think the best results are to be found in Diamond Mountain, Howell Mountain, Rutherford and Stags Leap.’

Napa & Sonoma Cabernet 2009

wines were much silkier; the quality of the fruit was great, and even when there was a ton of oak you could see that everything was beautifully done.' Jousselein agreed: 'Alexander Valley definitely showed much better than other parts of Sonoma. But the highlight for me was the centre of Napa: Oakville, Stags Leap and Howell Mountain. The best had great acidity and round tannins. Because of the sweetness on most, if the acidity was there it gave back-up.' Brook favoured Diamond Mountain, as well as Stags Leap for its 'usual elegance and balance'.

In terms of identifiable regionality, Jousselein said Stags Leap was the only AVA that stood out, thanks to its 'acidity, freshness and minty character'. Motion and Brook agreed, the latter adding: 'It's very difficult to talk about sub-regionality in Napa. People do it glibly all the time, but I think that if you asked them to pick out blind which is which, most would stumble.'

As for longevity, 'it's hard to know what they will do,' said Motion, 'but from experience the best Californian wines last for decades.' Jousselein felt that the more restrained wines would age best: 'Most were very ripe and lacking acidity and I fear that in 10 years' time they will be tired.' Brook recalled the opulent 1997 vintage, which has held up less well than cooler 1991 and 1994. 'Time will tell, but 2009 is an excellent year. The quality at the top is very, very good.'

Entry criteria:
Producers and UK agents were invited to submit any 2009 generic and specific AVA wines from Napa Valley and Sonoma County

Outstanding 18.5–20pts (95–100pts)



Dunn Vineyards, Howell Mountain, Napa Valley

Decanter average score: 18.5/20pts (95/100pts)

Individual judge's scores:

Stephen Brook 18.5 Yohann Jousselein MS 18.5 David Motion 18.5

£74.99 The Winery

With a craggy face, handsome mustache and cowboy hat, Randy Dunn is Napa Valley's original mountain man. He embraces Howell Mountain's volcanic soils, 600m elevations and the thick-skinned, tannic grapes grown there. Always 100% Cabernet Sauvignon, they show the herbal side of the variety, and are 14% alcohol or less, even if Dunn must use reserve osmosis technology to reduce the potency.

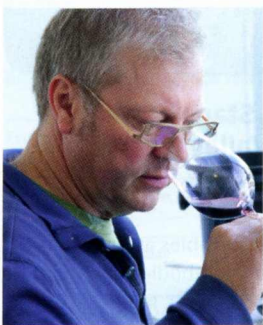
Stephen Brook Rich, comforting black fruits nose, with an elegant toastiness. Medium-bodied, ripe and almost sweet without being jammy, concentrated and sleek, and with a touch of alcohol just about carried by the fruit. Very good length, harmonious and complete.

Yohann Jousselein MS A supremely elegant wine. This shows a lot of ripe red fruits that are balanced by lovely acidity. It's a lighter style of Napa Cabernet Sauvignon, yet still contains great complexity.

David Motion Blackcurrant leaf and savoury notes on the nose. Palate is cool and polished, comprising flavours of blueberry, blackcurrant and sea salt.

Drink 2013–2030 **Alcohol** 13.9%

David Motion



David Motion is owner of London merchant The Winery, which is known particularly for its selection of Italian, Spanish, German and Californian wines.

Motion's verdict

'2009 seems to be a homogeneous, easy-to-like vintage in both Sonoma and Napa. Across the board the wines were well made, mainly in the modern idiom. Stand-outs for me were those that evoked classic Napa and Sonoma

Cabernets from the 1970s and 1980s – wines that are enjoyable to this day. At generic level, the wines were solid, if occasionally lacking some excitement. Many of the basic Napa Valley appellation wines were highly alcoholic and those with stated alcohol levels over 14.5% frequently tasted more like Zinfandel than classy Cabernet Sauvignon.

'The sub-regions were a big step up in quality, more focused and expressive, with clear terroir specificity. Alexander Valley is worth drawing attention to on the Sonoma side. The high-altitude AVAs, such as Spring Mountain, Howell Mountain and Diamond Mountain, really showed their breeding, as did Stags Leap District and Oakville on the Napa Valley floor.

'It was a pleasure to see such a spread of names from different eras making delicious wines: long established names such as Mondavi, Philip Togni and Trefethen, through to some that seemed to rise in the 1990s such as Staglin and Whitehall Lane and, more recently, Cliff Lede. I was also excited to see some unfamiliar names. I will be hopping on a plane shortly!'



Oakville Ranch, Oakville, Napa Valley 18.5 (95)

SB 18.5 YJ 18.5 DM 18.5

N/A UK www.oakvillerranch.com

Women rule at Oakville Ranch. Londoner Mary MacInnes Miner and her American husband Bob Miner purchased Oakville Ranch in 1989, but Bob's death in 1994 left Mary in charge. She now relies on general manager Paula Kornell (daughter of pioneering Napa Valley sparkling wine producer Hans Kornell) and winemaker Anne Vawter to enhance the brand. The 'token' male is vineyard manager Phil Coturri, a buddy of Grateful Dead band members and proponent of organic practices. Oakville Ranch is a sleeper among superstars – its wines become more complex with every vintage.

SB Super-ripe blackcurrant nose, with minty notes. Rich but firm, with some welcome austerity. The palate is less flamboyant than the nose, with robust tannins. Has ample acidity and persistence, but the fruit quality is excellent, as is the balance.

YJ A ripe style of Cabernet Sauvignon from Napa, it offers a lot of baked, dark fruit aromas given plenty of freshness due to the acidity and vegetal character of the wine. Great balance.

DM A lovely, deep wine with intense levels of concentrated, brambly fruit. A dense, generous offering with plenty of structure and a very long finish.

Drink 2013–2030 **Alc** 14.5%

Highly Recommended 17–18.25pts (90–94pts)



O'Shaughnessy, Howell Mountain, Napa Valley 18.25 (94)

SB 18.5 YJ 18.5 DM 17.5

N/A UK www.oshaughnessywinery.com

Spiced bramble jam on the nose with touches of earth, chocolate and tobacco. Offering great complexity, it's rich, opulent, powerful, a bit tarry, with rugged mountain fruit, chewy tannins and a certain earthiness. Terrific weight of fruit; will go the distance. **Drink** 2013–2030 **Alc** 14.8%



Robert Mondavi, Reserve, Oakville, Napa Valley 18 (93) SB 17 YJ 18 DM 19

£60 Morgan Classic Wines

Intense essence of summer and autumn fruit on the nose with black cherry in there as well. Great acidity and lovely round tannins. Wonderful, silky mouthfeel, with sweet, supple, ripe fruit that's not cloying or overdone. Top shelf.

Drink 2013–2035 **Alc** 15%



Far Niente, Oakville, Napa Valley 17.75 (92) SB 18.5 YJ 16.5 DM 18

£92–£110 Christopher Keiller, Fintry Wines, Slurp, Winedown

Deep autumnal fruit with a dark side and a voluptuous plummy nose. Rich, velvety, full-bodied, concentrated, with generosity of fruit, fine ripeness, and fine-grained tannins with a hint of black pepper on the finish. Delicious and long. **Drink** 2013–2030 **Alc** 14.5%



J Davies, Diamond Mountain District, Napa Valley 17.75 (92)

SB 17.5 YJ 18 DM 17.5

POA Vineyard Cellars

Tightly wound deep, lush fruit with touches of bacon and chocolate. Good attack; supple, concentrated, with ripe tannins, fresh acidity and spice on the finish with a hint of Turkish Delight. Shows finesse, great balance and complexity. **Drink** 2013–2025 **Alc** 14.5%

'Time will tell, but 2009 is an excellent year. The quality at the top is very, very good'

Stephen Brook



Staglin Family Vineyard Estate, Rutherford, Napa Valley 17.75 (92)

SB 17.5 YJ 18.5 DM 17.5

N/A UK www.staglinfamily.com

Cloves, aniseed, vanilla on the nose, which also carries lush plum and black cherry. Great acidity and well integrated, this is rich but not heavy, has a certain limpidity and enough acidity to carry through to the finish. Complex, balanced and should age well. **Drink** 2014–2030 **Alc** 14.9%



Diamond Creek, Gravelly Meadow, Diamond Mountain District, Napa Valley 17.5 (91) SB 18.5 YJ 17.5 DM 16.5

POA Vineyard Cellars

Firm but elegant blackberry and damson nose, with a curious mineral edge. Suave texture, with plenty of stuffing, and notes of cassis, tobacco and cedarwood. A complex wine with intensity and balance. **Drink** 2015–2025 **Alc** 14.1%



Brandlin, Mount Veeder, Napa Valley 17.25 (90+) SB 17.5 YJ 18 DM 16.5

£50 Thorman Hunt

Intense plummy nose, with a balsamic edge. Plump and luxurious, with a pure sense of fruit that carries through every stage. Rugged and peppery, and with enough acidity to give some persistence. **Drink** 2013–2025 **Alc** 14.5%



Chimney Rock, Stags Leap District, Napa Valley 17.25 (90+)

SB 18 YJ 16.5 DM 17

POA Corking Wines

Malted hot chocolate, brambles and oaky black fruits on the nose. Rich, full-bodied, has good weight of fruit and ripe tannins. Imposing but not extracted, has acidity, persistence and an attractive texture. **Drink** 2014–2025 **Alc** 14.5%



Philip Togni, Spring Mountain, Napa Valley 17.25 (90+) SB 17.5 YJ 16.5 DM 18

£64–£83 Bibendum, Christopher Keiller, Farr Vintners, Slurp

European in style with a minty overtone to the nose, which shows purity of fruit. Rich, suave and full-bodied, with concentration and some freshness, lifting a long spicy finish. Controlled and expressive. **Drink** 2013–2030 **Alc** 14.5%



Quintessa, Rutherford, Napa Valley 17.25 (90+) SB 17.5 YJ 18 DM 16.5

N/A UK www.quintessa.com

Muted but oaky black fruits on the nose. Medium-bodied, an elegant style, silky texture and flavours of blackcurrant jam, sweet spices, cedar and caramel. Doesn't lack tannins or structure, but carries them with a light touch. Should age well. **Drink** 2013–2028 **Alc** 14.2%



Spottswoode, St Helena, Napa Valley 17.25 (90+) SB 18.5 YJ 17 DM 16.5

POA Domaine Direct

Sumptuous, stylish oaky, blackcurrant fruit on the nose with coffee bean and nutmeg. Excellent balance and great lift. Zesty, pure, long and spicy, with no rough edges but plenty of poise and complexity on the finish. Has great ageing potential. **Drink** 2014–2030 **Alc** 14.5%

Napa & Sonoma Cabernet 2009

Highly Recommended (continued) 17-18.25pts (90-94pts)



Alexander Valley Vineyards, Alexander School Reserve, Alexander Valley, Sonoma County 17 (90) SB 18 YJ 16 DM 17

N/A UK www.avvwine.com
Herbal nose with blackcurrant, damsons, mint, toasty oak and coffee beans. Elegant, solid, but not heavy, has structure and acidity to carry it through to a long finish. A bit gawky, but should improve with age. **Drink** 2013-2030 **Alc** 13.8%



Cardinale, Napa Valley 17 (90) SB 17 YJ 16.5 DM 17.5

POA Fells
Sleek, modern nose of purple fruits and spices, such as clove and black pepper. Great intensity, with touches of leather, cigar box and a plush, silky feel. Certainly has ample fruit and swagger, and plenty of energy to carry through onto the long finish. **Drink** 2013-2025 **Alc** 14.5%



Lokoya, Mount Veeder, Napa Valley 17 (90) SB 17.5 YJ 17.5 DM 16

POA Fells
Rich tarry blackcurrant nose, dense and imposing. Truckloads of high-quality oak and powerful black fruit with a textured earthiness. A touch extracted, but there's persuasive fruit here and a long, robust finish. Needs time before it's truly ready. **Drink** 2015-2028 **Alc** 14.4%



Trefethen Family Vineyards, Oak Knoll District, Napa Valley 17 (90) SB 17 XYJ 16.5 DM 17.5

N/A UK www.trefethen.com
Lean but pure blackcurrant nose, quite restrained and elegant. Sleek, lifted and pure, far from the typical Napa sumptuousness, and a nice sense of freshness runs through it. The elegance and coolness are welcome and appealing. **Drink** 2014-2030 **Alc** 14.1%

'This tasting has confirmed my opinion of Napa's 2009 vintage; the wines are rich and opulent'

Yohann Jousselein MS



World's End, Good Times, Bad Times, Oakville, Napa Valley 17 (90) SB 16 YJ 17.5 DM 17.5

£78 Harrods, Fine & Rare, Imperial Wine, Vineyard Cellars, Villeneuve Wines
Inky, succulent, tarry fruits and a savoury nose. Plump, full-bodied, with swagger and earthiness. Tannic with the quality of fruit standing out. Flavours of blackcurrant, chocolate and black pepper. **Drink** 2015-2035 **Alc** 14.7%

Recommended 15-16.75pts (83-89pts)

Wine	Score	SB	YJ	DM	Tasting note	Alc	Drink	Price	Stockists
Beringer, Private Reserve, Napa Valley	16.75 (89)	17.5	17	16	Juicy fruit with vanilla custard and something medicinal. Cassis and prune on the palate. Voluptuous, creamy, full-bodied, lavish fruit, with spice and vigour.	14.5%	2015-2025	POA	Treasury Wine Estates
Ferrari-Carano, Tresor, Sonoma County	16.75 (89)	17	17.5	16	Aromatic with notes of liquorice, chocolate, tobacco and black cherry. Great structure, plenty of lift and vigour, and tannins carry through to long finish.	14.4%	2013-2020	POA	Vineyard Cellars
Groth, Reserve, Oakville, Napa Valley	16.75 (89)	18	16.5	16	Sumptuous blackberry nose, lifted and fruity. A big wine. Has depth as well as power and the tannins are fine-grained. Great potential due to sharp acidity.	14.9%	2014-2028	N/A UK	www.grothwines.com
Hanna, Alexander Valley, Sonoma County	16.75 (89)	17.5	16.5	16	Smoky black fruits nose, a hint of raisins but not cooked. Succulent and fleshy, with sweet fruit and ripe tannins. The texture is sleek and the wine has finesse.	13.9%	2013-2022	N/A UK	www.hannawinery.com
Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, Cask 23, Stags Leap District, Napa Valley	16.75 (89)	17	16.5	17	Violets and vanilla cream with woodsmoke aromas. Polished, elegant tannins, this is sleek, rich and fresh. Well made with plenty of finesse and dense fruit.	13.5%	2014-2025	£200	Roberson, Winedirect
Stags' Leap Winery, The Leap, Stags Leap District, Napa Valley	16.75 (89)	17	15.5	17.5	Discreetly toasty blackberry nose. Tightly coiled fruit, muscular and with a sense of vigour and power. Not in harmony yet but the balance seems right.	14.1%	2014-2025	POA	Treasury Wine Estates
Whitehall Lane, Reserve, Napa Valley	16.5 (88)	17	15.5	17	Charming, fruit-driven nose with chocolate, coffee and caramel. Rich, suave, concentrated, with underlying acidity to give freshness. Needs more time.	14.4%	2013-2022	£40	Vineyard Cellars
Cliff Lede, Stags Leap District, Napa Valley	16.25 (87)	16	15	18	Supple, succulent, plump and rounded, with considerable weight of excellent-quality fruit. Structured and controlled, but may be too burly for some.	14.9%	2013-2030	POA	Vineyard Cellars
Duckhorn, Napa Valley	16.25 (87)	16.5	15.5	16.5	A rich style with notes of blackcurrant, blackberry and cooked cherries. Medium-bodied, supple and concentrated. Ripe tannins. Correct and balanced.	14.5%	2013-2025	£39-£49.99	Invinity Wines, Miles Better Wines, Slurp, Wine Treasury, WoodWinters
Etude, Napa Valley	16.25 (87)	16.5	17	15.5	Great elegance. Good attack, ripe and succulent, with fine concentration of fruit, big ripe tannins and sturdy structure. Needs time to knit together.	14.8%	2015-2025	POA	Treasury Wine Estates
Frei Brothers, Alexander Valley, Sonoma County	16.25 (87)	17.5	15	16.5	Notes of coffee bean and cherries. Rich, suave, full-bodied and generous, lashings of ripe fruit balanced by acidity, with a lovely finish. Immediate appeal.	14.3%	2013-2022	N/A UK	www.freibrothers.com
Hourglass, Estate, Napa Valley	16.25 (87)	15.5	17.5	16	Nose of grilled fruit, plum, hickory barbecue, tar and eucalyptus. Packed with fruit, is almost Zinfandel-like in its power and richness. Impressive but hefty.	15.4%	2013-2025	N/A UK	www.hourglasswine.com
Joseph Phelps, Insignia, Napa Valley	16.25 (87)	16.5	15.5	17	Big with broody black fruit. Sumptuous plummy nose. Rich, velvety and concentrated. Has abundant assertive tannins and bitter chocolate aftertaste.	14.5%	2013-2025	£134	Private Cellar

Napa & Sonoma Cabernet 2009

Recommended (continued) 15-16.75pts (83-89pts)

Wine	Score	SB	YJ	DM	Tasting note	Alc	Drink	Price	Stockists
Lancaster Estate, Alexander Valley, Sonoma County	16.25 (87)	16.5	15	17	Enjoyable, nose of plum, blackberry, cedar, mint and eucalyptus. Rich and suave with ample juiciness, with good sense of fruit. A bit raw now.	14.6%	2013-2030	N/A UK	www.lancaster-estate.com
Markham Vineyards, Napa Valley	16.25 (87)	16	17.5	15.5	Discreet blackberries and cream nose, with stylish oak and red fruits. Saturated with blue and black fruit on the palate. Straightforward but balanced.	14.2%	2013-2025	N/A UK	www.markhamvineyards.com
Silverado Vineyards, Solo, Stags Leap District, Napa Valley	16.25 (87)	17.5	14.5	17	Cooler, herbaceous nose of blue fruits and touch of orange zest. Medium-bodied, a graceful style without too much extraction. Doesn't lack structure.	13.9%	2013-2025	£70	Field & Fawcett, Handford, Hedonism, WoodWinters
Vérité, La Joie, Sonoma County	16.25 (87)	17	15	16.5	Lush blackcurrant nose, quite oaky. Rich, plump, full-bodied, supple on the palate with a spicy perkiness. Balanced with a silky, sweet finish.	14.5%	2013-2025	POA	Fells
Cornerstone Cellars, Howell Mountain, Napa Valley	16 (86)	16	16	16	An almost Bovril, meaty nose with touches of blood and coffee. Porty but persuasive. Rich, full-bodied and voluptuous, but alcohol robs its elegance.	14.9%	2015-2025	N/A UK	www.cornerstonecellars.com
Kenwood, Sonoma County	16 (86)	16	17	15	Elegant style with softness to the tannins. Rich, supple and concentrated, with notes of chocolate and coffee. Not ambitious but well balanced and long.	13.5%	2013-2025	N/A UK	www.kenwoodvineyards.com
Metaphora, Napa Valley	16 (86)	16	17	15	Ripe smoky nose, quite oaky. Fairly rich, rounded, with ripe tannins and moderate acidity. Forward in style, this may need a bit of time to open up.	13.7%	2014-2025	N/A UK	www.metaphorawines.com
Rudd Vineyards, Samantha's, Oakville, Napa Valley	16 (86)	14.5	16.5	17	Aromas of ripe cherries, chocolate, vanilla, mint and liquorice. Charming, supple fruit. Good length and acidity, but dry tannins on the finish.	14.5%	2014-2020	£86.47	Vineyard Cellars
Schug, Heritage Reserve, Sonoma County	16 (86)	15.5	17	15.5	Prune, plum and delicate scent of tobacco. Slightly herbaceous but that gives freshness, a red-fruit tang to the palate and surge of blue fruit on the middle.	14%	2013-2020	£54	Amps Fine Wines, DeFine Food & Wine, General Wine Company, Handford Wines, Oddbins, Philglas & Swiggott, Planet of the Grapes, The Solent Cellar
Shafer, One Point Five, Stags Leap District, Napa Valley	16 (86)	15.5	17	15.5	Intense nose with notes of black cherries followed by a hint of chocolate and coffee. Broad, fleshy, full-bodied, concentrated and ripe; perhaps too ripe.	15.3%	2013-2025	£46-£56	Christopher Piper, Fine & Rare, Richard Dawes, Uncorked, WoodWinters
Starmont, Napa Valley	16 (86)	15.5	16.5	16	High roast coffee notes with lush blackberries. Rich, juicy, concentrated, with enough acidity to perk up the palate and Christmas spices on the finish.	14%	2013-2024	N/A UK	www.merryvale.com
Terlato Family Vineyards, Rutherford, Napa Valley	16 (86)	17	16	15	Super-ripe, raisiny nose. Plump, rounded, juicy, full-bodied, black fruits and chocolate, but lacks a touch of freshness, resulting in a slightly heavy finish.	15.5%	2013-2025	N/A UK	www.terlatowines.com
Capture Wines, Révélation, Pine Mountain, Sonoma County	15.75 (85+)	16.5	16.5	14.5	Fruit driven with a lot of ripe dark fruits. There's ample concentration here and no lack of tannic grip, but it's still a bit austere and needs time.	13.9%	2014-2020	N/A UK	www.capturewines.com
Darioush, Napa Valley	15.75 (85+)	15	16	16	An almost floral element to the nose. Broad, lush, opulent, full-bodied, with black fruits and hefty tannins that give a chocolatey tone. Long, if a touch hot.	14.8%	2013-2025	N/A UK	www.darioush.com
Dutcher Crossing, Taylor Reserve, Dry Creek Valley, Sonoma County	15.75 (85+)	15	16	16	A very rich, showy style of Cabernet. Broad, quite opulent, has plenty of flesh and weight with sweet tannins, but the acidity is rather fierce.	14.5%	2013-2022	N/A UK	www.dutchercrossingwinery.com
Ehret Family Winery, Knights Valley, Sonoma County	15.75 (85+)	16	18	13	Sweet black fruits nose, with a touch of mocha and cedarwood. Rich and plump, has good underlying acidity and moderate tannins. But not harmonious.	14.3%	2013-2020	N/A UK [†]	www.ehretfamilywinery.com [†]
First Press, Napa Valley	15.75 (85+)	15.5	16.5	15.5	Cherries on the nose. Rich, supple, full-bodied, plump and spicy, though low in acidity. Made in a fruit-driven style, but slightly cooked fruit in the middle.	14.5%	2013-2022	£17.99	Waitrose
Frog's Leap, Napa Valley	15.75 (85+)	15	17	15.5	Solid, elegant and ripe. A cigar box nose, followed by plenty of black fruits in the mouth. Good balance and acidity but lacks a little energy.	13.5%	2013-2020	£27.90-£29.95	AG Wines, Harper Wells, Laytons, Philglas & Swiggott, Slurp, WoodWinters
Grgich Hills Estate, Napa Valley	15.75 (85+)	14.5	17	16	This wine show a light intensity of red fruit with vanilla and other purple fruits. Polished and sleek, medium-bodied with elegance, not overdone.	14.6%	2014-2022	N/A UK	www.grgich.com
Hendry, Napa Valley	15.75 (85+)	15	16	16.5	Muted blackcurrant nose but has a classic Cabernet character, and well judged oak. Complex, broad and lush, with fleshy fruit. Perhaps a touch soft.	14.7%	2013-2025	N/A UK	www.hendrywines.com
Jack Nicklaus, Napa Valley	15.75 (85+)	15	16.5	15.5	The aromas are mainly directed to sweet black fruits. Medium-bodied, supple, not very concentrated despite the firm tannins, with a hint of black pepper.	14.2%	2013-2022	N/A UK	www.nicklauswines.com
Louis. M. Martini, Napa Valley	15.75 (85+)	15.5	17	15	Lush blackcurrant nose, a touch cooked. Rich but soft, juicy and luxurious, yet with firm tannins to balance the slight sweetness. A ripe style with finesse.	14.5%	2013-2025	£20	Tesco Wine by the Case
Mount Brave, Mount Veeder, Napa Valley	15.75 (85+)	16	16.5	15	Toasty new oak which is high in the mix at every stage. Rich, creamy, full-bodied, with assertive tannins. Impressive weight of fruit, but lacks finesse.	14.5%	2015-2025	N/A UK	www.mtbravewines.com
Pine Ridge, Forefront, Napa Valley	15.75 (85+)	14.5	16.5	16	Rich black cherry nose with touches of graphite. Ripe, plump, and assertive, with jammy black fruits and a lot of tannin. Intense but with good freshness.	14.5%	2013-2020	£23.99	Liberty Wines
Swanson Vineyards, Alexis, Napa Valley	15.75 (85+)	17	15	15	Deep ripe fruit with the merest hint of parma violets on the nose. Ripe in style, opulent and fleshy. Not very nuanced, but delivers a lot of fruit.	14.8%	2013-2022	N/A UK	www.swansonvineyards.com
Faust, Napa Valley	15.5 (85)	15	15	16.5	Classic Napa Cabernet nose in the modern idiom. Rich, supple, concentrated, and with some lively acidity, but the tannins are not very refined.	14.2%	2013-2029	N/A UK	www.faustwine.com
Jordan, Alexander Valley, Sonoma County	15.5 (85)	15.5	14.5	16.5	Quite European in style with a hint of bay leaf and eucalyptus. Firm and solid, tannic and even extracted, has good concentration but lacks a light touch.	13.5%	2013-2022	£44.95	Coe Vintners
Monticello Vineyards, Corley Reserve, Napa Valley	15.5 (85)	14.5	16	16	Coffee bean and broody fruit, tobacco and bitter chocolate on the nose. Medium-bodied and well made, if a little dominated by oak at the moment.	14.2%	2013-2025	N/A UK	www.corleyfamilynapavalley.com
Pedroncelli, Three Vineyards, Dry Creek Valley, Sonoma County	15.5 (85)	15	17.5	14	Coffee bean aromas with blackberry and a whiff of vanilla. Relatively light for Dry Creek and slightly unformed, but has notes of fresh plum and chocolate.	14.3%	2013-2023	POA	Amathus
Sebastiani, Alexander Valley, Sonoma County	15.5 (85)	16	15.5	15	Modern and well made, with plenty of blackcurrant on the nose. A lighter style but balanced, attractive and long. Unlikely to improve much with age.	14.2%	2013-2022	£25.95-£30.99	Berkmann Wine Cellars, Slurp
St. Clement Vineyards, Oropas, Napa Valley	15.5 (85)	14.5	16.5	15.5	Ripe, with a lot of chocolate, caramel and sweet fruits. Rich and velvety, a sumptuous style with a good deal of spice. Fruit is good but alcohol dominates.	14.7%	2013-2025	POA	Treasury Wine Estates
Stuhlmuller Vineyards, Alexander Valley, Sonoma County	15.5 (85)	16.5	14.5	15.5	Figs, blackberry and plums on the nose. Ripe and succulent, with plenty of upfront fruit and ripe tannins. Plenty of energy here but needs food and time.	14.2%	2014-2025	N/A UK	www.stuhlmullervineyards.com

Recommended (continued) 15–16.75pts (83–89pts)

Wine	Score	SB	YJ	DM	Tasting note	Alc	Drink	Price	Stockists
Clos du Val, Stags Leap District, Napa Valley	15.25 (84)	16.5	14.5	15	Kirsch and sour cherry notes in nose with herbaceous notes and hint of tar. Rich and limpid, it shows restraint for Napa Cabernet, but doesn't lack structure.	13.5%	2014–2025	£50–£60	Boutinot
Corison, Napa Valley	15.25 (84)	15	14.5	16.5	Some herbal, eucalyptus notes feature in the nose along with rich black fruits. A surge of blackcurrant in the mouth, but the alcohol seems a bit too generous.	13.6%	2013–2029	N/A UK	www.corison.com
deLorimier Winery, Crazy Creek, Alexander Valley, Sonoma County	15.25 (84)	17.5	14	14.5	Smoky and meaty nose, which is focused and lifted. Sweet and rich, but shows a light touch thanks to fresh acidity, and the tannins are ripe and sleek.	14.7%	2014–2022	N/A UK	www.delorimierwinery.com
Long Meadow Ranch, Napa Valley	15.25 (84)	14	16	16	Plum compote nose, great concentration of black fruits followed by notes of toffee and a few vegetal touches. Medium-bodied with bright acidity.	13.5%	2013–2020	N/A UK	www.longmeadowranch.com
Merryvale, Napa Valley	15.25 (84)	15	14	16.5	Strawberry jam with cinnamon on the nose. Bursting with baked fruit and spice. Tannic and quite extracted, so little finesse. Long, chocolatey finish.	14.9%	2015–2025	N/A UK	www.merryvale.com
Rodney Strong, Sonoma County	15.25 (84)	15.5	16.5	14	Vanilla and red fruit nose. More European in style. Well made with a plump attack, has ample acidity and tannin to cut through the richness of fruit.	13.5%	2013–2020	£15.95	Slurp, Wine Treasury
St. Supéry, Napa Valley	15.25 (84)	16	14.5	15.5	Rich, brambly, blackberry nose, quite chocolatey. Big boned and sweet, concentrated, with firm tannins, this has weight, density and complexity.	14.7%	2013–2025	POA	Laytons
Stonehedge, Reserve, Napa Valley	15.25 (84)	14.5	17	14.5	A ripe style of Cabernet, nose sweet with notes of blackcurrant jam. Soft, rounded, slack, lacks concentration and energy but has integrated tannins.	14.2%	2013–2020	£27.97	Eurowines
Stonestreet Winery, Monument Ridge, Sonoma County	15.25 (84)	16.5	15	14	Rich, has broad shoulders, hefty but succulent, with tannin and more swagger than finesse, showing ripe black fruits followed by notes of coffee and caramel.	15.3%	2013–2022	£39.99	Harrods
Waterstone, Napa Valley	15.25 (84)	15	14	17	Lean, oaky nose with some coffee tones and cherry fruit. Plush and plump palate but doesn't have much character. The finish is fresh and quite long.	14.5%	2013–2025	£19.80	Hedonism Wines, Majestic, Vineyard Cellars
Ramey, Annum, Napa Valley	15 (83)	14	15.5	15.5	Ripe, black fruits on the nose with a leathery, vegetal hint. Fairly rich, rounded, and reasonably concentrated, but slightly marred by extracted tannins.	15%	2013–2025	£68.95	AG Wines
Rutherford Hill, Napa Valley	15 (83)	14.5	14.5	16	Slightly restrained but alluring nose with smoke and tobacco. Touch of sour cherry in the mouth at first, followed by blackcurrants. Lacks a bit of zest.	14.3%	2013–2025	N/A UK	www.rutherfordhill.com

Fair 13–14.75pts (76–82pts)
■ Cakebread Cellars, Benchland Select, Napa Valley 14.75 (82) ■ Freemark Abbey, Napa Valley 14.75 (82)
■ Moone Tsai, Cor Leonis, Napa Valley 14.75 (82)
■ Chateau Montelena, Napa Valley 14.5 (81) ■ Sbragia Family Vineyards, Monte Rosso Vineyard, Sonoma Valley

14.5 (81) ■ Fleuron Wnes, Alexander Valley, Sonoma County 13.75 (79) ■ Kathryn Hall, Napa Valley 13.75 (79)

For full UK stockist details, see p83

Next month's panel tastings
Volnay premier cru 2010
and St-Joseph 2010

My top three

Stephen Brook

■ **Spottswoode, St Helena, Napa Valley**
This long-established vineyard always produces exceptional and elegant wines, and this is no exception. It's the purity and poise that make this so distinguished. A bling-free wine that will give pleasure when young or after 10 years in bottle. **18.5/20pts (95/100pts) Drink 2014–2030**

■ **Diamond Creek, Gravelly Meadow, Diamond Mountain District, Napa Valley**
This property makes three Cabernets from different terroirs, and for decades they've been classic wines. In the past they could be too tannic, but today show power and intensity without excessive extraction. Built to last. **18.5 (95) Drink 2015–2025**

■ **Far Niente, Oakville, Napa Valley**
A historic Oakville property with a long track record, but marginalised by new arrivals in Napa. But the Cabernet has always been great and 2009 is no exception: voluptuous and velvety, fine tannins, and a long harmonious finish. Simply delicious. **18.5 (95) Drink 2013–2030**

My top three

Yohann Jousselin MS

■ **Staglin Family Vineyard Estate, Rutherford, Napa Valley** A lovely subtle Cabernet with firm tannins, a generous ripeness and great acidity. The wine offers a very intense nose with notes of ripe black fruits followed by a touch of cedar wood, tobacco and a hint of eucalyptus which bring a touch of freshness. **18.5/20pts (95/100pts) Drink 2014–2030**

■ **Diamond Creek, Gravelly Meadow, Diamond Mountain District, Napa Valley** I've always enjoyed the complexity of these wines. Another great example of a lighter, fresher style of Cabernet from Napa. It's elegant and pure with notes of crème de cassis, coffee, tobacco and a very long finish. **17.5 (91) Drink 2015–2025**

■ **O'Shaughnessy, Howell Mountain, Napa Valley** A lovely wine, very different from my other two picks. It's intense with notes of ripe dark fruit as well as chocolate, toffee and sweet spices balanced by a very sharp acidity. It will be outstanding in 10 years' time. **18.5 (95) Drink 2013–2030**

My top three

David Motion

■ **Robert Mondavi, Reserve, Oakville, Napa Valley** I'm delighted to find the new owners are not tinkering with this iconic label. This wine ages beautifully and while it sits comfortably with European palates, it's unmistakably Napa. The '09 has intense summer and autumn fruit, with a silky mouthfeel. Concentrated, supple and long. **19/20pts (96/100pts) Drink 2013–2035**

■ **J Davies, Diamond Mountain District, Napa Valley** Fragrant with roses and Turkish Delight, it has tightly wound, deep fruit and a lovely freshness. Made by Schramsberg, the sparkling wine producer, from three parcels on Diamond Mountain, including Jacob Schram's two original hillside vineyards from 1862. **17.5 (91) Drink 2013–2025**

■ **Lancaster Estate, Alexander Valley, Sonoma County** This reminds me of what drew me to Cal Cabs and Alexander Valley in particular, in the 1980s and '90s. It has an enjoyably retro nose of cedar, mint and eucalyptus. There's a good fruit and structure but I found it nicely traditional and not over-juicy. I adore this herbal, more restrained style. **17 (90) Drink 2013–2030**

NB: the tasters' top wines are not necessarily their top-scoring, rather those which, on learning the wines' identity, they feel are the most notable given their provenance, price or other factors

Napa & Sonoma Cabernet 2009

Expert summary: Linda Murphy

A disappointing tasting in comparison to the 2007 and 2008 vintages, but strong individual performances from producers old and new provided several high points



Linda Murphy is a freelance wine writer based in Sonoma and the former wine editor of the *San Francisco Chronicle*

THE RESULTS OF these 2009 Californian Cabernets are disappointing when compared to *Decanter's* evaluations of the 2007s and 2008s. The 2008s produced four Outstanding wines and 2007 five; there are just two from 2009. At the Highly Recommended level, 2009 had a mere 16, while 2008 and 2007 shone with 38 and 43 respectively.

It could be argued that with this 2009 tasting focusing on Napa and Sonoma (and not all California Cabernets, as has been done in the past), the number of top scorers would decline because of fewer candidates. This isn't the case. Of the Outstanding and Highly Recommended picks from the 2008 vintage, for example, only one was from outside of Napa and Sonoma.

Those who say vintage doesn't matter in California should consider themselves wrong after the outcome of this tasting. True, rarely are there disasters in Napa and Sonoma, yet some vintages are more problematic and dramatic than others, and 2009 was one of them. The cool growing season was punctuated by three days of heavy rain in mid-October that forced winemakers to either harvest early, before the rain, or trust that Indian summer conditions would follow. If half the producers chose the first option, and half the second, one can expect half as many Outstanding and Highly Recommended ratings.

Our three experts were able to recognise the beauty lurking behind the Dunn Vineyards Cabernet, always tightly wound and begging for a long sleep in the cellar. The other Outstanding wine, from Oakville Ranch, is an under-the-radar flyer that has been a consistent high scorer at *Decanter* tastings over the past three years.

Betty O'Shaughnessy, Dunn's Howell Mountain neighbour, is a rising star. Her Cabernet, made by Sean Capiaux, just missed Outstanding status. If she is a relative newcomer, Philip Togni of Philip Togni Vineyard (17.25/90+pts) has quietly made superb Cabernet with Bordeaux leanings on Spring Mountain since 1981.

Californian Cabernet is still Napa Valley's show, although Alexander Valley Vineyards, established nearly 40 years ago in Sonoma's Alexander Valley by the Wetzel family, scored well with its Alexander School Reserve. Yes, old-school vintners can still get it done. **D**

'Those who say vintage doesn't matter in California should consider themselves wrong'