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Decanter

Burgundy 2017

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Californian Cabernet Sauvignon 2010

Questions over ripeness made this a controversial vintage, particularly stateside, but the claret-like freshness and elegance should appeal to most British palates, says Stephen Brook

This was a vintage that divided opinion at the time it was released. This was because the growing season had been unusually cool, which slowed the ripening in Napa and Sonoma. Sudden extreme heat in late August caused some sunburn and shrivelling, and there was more to come in late September. Some estates bunch-thinned to speed up maturation. But the vintage was 10 to 20 days later than usual, and heavy rain in late October caused big problems for those estates that hadn't finished the harvest. However, this was not an issue for most properties.

The Cabernet grapes were deep coloured, thick skinned, kept high acidity and attained moderate sugar levels. The question being asked at harvest was whether the grapes were fully ripe by the time they were picked, or whether they had a greenness that most American palates would dislike.

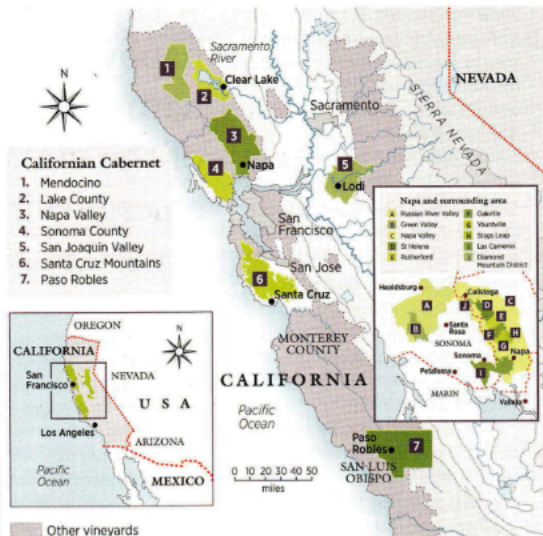
Europeans, weaned on clarets, usually accept a measure of herbaceousness, as it gives the wines cut and verve, but US drinkers are used to high levels of ripeness – something California usually has no problem fulfilling.

Divided opinions

Not surprisingly, the young 2010s proved controversial. Stateside, many tasters and consumers – the domestic market is crucial for Californian Cabernets – did indeed find many of the wines too stringy and herbaceous, although there were some dissenting voices.

When *Decanter* tasted a wide range of the 2010s in 2013, we were for the most part enchanted by the freshness and elegance of the wines. But there were some green and underripe examples, and also some wines that had an overripe profile as growers

Map: Maggie Neilson



‘The best wines are likely to cruise along for a decade or so more without losing freshness’

sought to override the character of the vintage.

In Napa many of the best wines came from the valley floor, as they tended to be ripe and less overly tannic than those from mountain vineyards. Again, there would be many exceptions, depending on local conditions and the quality of the farming, as well as the date of harvest. Cabernet was broadly successful across Sonoma, and Santa Cruz Mountains benefitted from a hot October that fully ripened the fruit.

After nearly a decade in bottle, the best wines seem to be on a plateau – certainly approachable now or very soon, but likely to cruise along for a decade or so more, without losing their freshness and balance.



CAL CABS: THE FACTS

Total plantings for Cabernet Sauvignon across California

Approximately 29,000ha in 2010 compared with 36,740ha in 2016

Breakdown in key regions

Napa 7,217ha (8,400 in 2016)
 Sonoma 4,345ha (4,980ha in 2016)
 Santa Cruz Mountains 133ha (similar in 2016)

CAL CABS: KNOW YOUR VINTAGES

2016 A cool year with even ripening, completed by a warm September. An average crop of well-balanced wines.

2015 Some losses at flowering, but the summer was hot and dry with a little raising. But fine concentration and quality across all regions.

2014 A moderate growing season, giving small berries of excellent concentration and early ripening. Rich wines with some overripeness.

2013 Normal growing season, giving small berries with thick skins, leading to powerful, tannic wines. Some wines show overripeness or over-extraction, but overall a fine, structured year.

2012 Consistent growing season and even ripening. Produced elegant Cabernets with supple tannins and moderate alcohols. But some wines lack structure and are too forward.

2011 A small crop with rain at harvest. The best Cabernets were picked before the early October rains. Selection essential.

Stephen Brook has been a *Decanter* contributing editor since 1996. He is an author of almost 40 books, including the multi-award winning *The Wines of California* (Faber & Faber, 1999) >

The verdict

The freshness that characterised this vintage on release is still evident eight years on. Stephen Brook and his panel report on a tasting of enjoyable wines just hitting their stride

Our panel was familiar with this vintage, thus predisposed to enjoy the wines. And for the most part we did.

It was interesting to reflect on whether the vintage entailed a loss of Californian typicity. Piotr Pietras MS was adamant it did not: 'The wines have a refreshing character, but they are still fruit-driven and recognisable as Californian Cabernet. What I find admirable is that they have a real consistency of style. They're fresh and balanced, and thus have good ageing potential. Nor was the oak obtrusive.' He particularly admired the two wines from Sta Cruz Mountains and, among the Napa wines, those from Oakville.

Alex Hunt MW agreed. 'Yes, the oak use and the extraction seemed proportionate. Often with a tasting of big reds like Californian Cabernet, the tannins build up on the palate and that can distort one's appreciation of the wines, especially those at the end of the flight. That wasn't the case here.

'In part that's because the alcohols were on average a bit lower than usual.' Indeed, they ranged from 13% to 15%, though the lax US labelling laws mean it's hard to be certain what the true alcohol level is in any wine. But there were fewer wines than usual with discernible alcohol on the palate.

Hunt was not entirely satisfied by the styles of some of the wines. 'I find

the character of the vintage is under-represented. For me the least satisfactory wines were those that tried to subvert the fresher style that the vintage delivered. There were wines that were both high in alcohol without tasting fully ripe.

'I suspect that's because those wineries pushed the ripeness levels excessively, hoping to end up with a big, rich, overly Californian style that wasn't true to the conditions in 2010. If you're known for a certain style, then it's tempting, if not wise, to try to impose it, whatever the vintage. The best wines were made by producers who were comfortable with the hand nature had dealt them.'

There is often said to be a clear divide in Napa, and parts of Sonoma, between wines produced from vineyards on or near the valley floor and those from mountain sites at higher elevations where climatic conditions tend to be different. However, we broadly found quality to be evenly divided between the two locations. It was also agreed that most wines were at that attractive stage when they could be drunk soon or cellared for a few more years – even for another decade. There was little of the blowsiness and jamminess that can cause an initially appealing wine to collapse after a few years in bottle.

American wine lovers – and those, Pietras reminded us, from countries

'I applaud those happy to let the natural balance of the vintage emerge with time' Alex Hunt MW

more recently captivated by fine wine such as Russia – tend to drink wines such as these too young. They relish the beguiling exuberance of a young Cal Cab, but may miss out on the complex nuances that come with age.

Hunt took up the theme: 'Napa tends to play safe by making wines that are enjoyable on release, for which there are sound commercial reasons. But with 2010 I applaud those who didn't opt for immediate accessibility, and were happy to let the wine gradually acquire more complex notes, and to allow the natural balance of the vintage to emerge with time.'

It's clear that 2010 won't appeal to all Cal Cab lovers, as it is far from stereotypical. But those who enjoy freshness, elegance, and balance will find a great deal to relish, and the best wines will go the distance.

THE SCORES

45 wines tasted
Exceptional 0
Outstanding 2
Highly Recommended 26
Recommended 14
Commended 2
Fair 0
Poor 0
Faulty 1

Entry criteria: Producers and UK agents were invited to submit their 2010 vintage Californian Cabernets. Up to three wines per producer were permitted.

THE JUDGES

Stephen Brook



Brook has been a contributing editor to Decanter since 1996 and has won a clutch of awards for his wine writing. The author of many books, his works include *The Wines of California* (Faber &

Faber 1999), which won three awards. Brook also fully revised the last two editions of Hugh Johnson's *Wine Companion*.

Alex Hunt MW



Hunt is purchasing director for Berkmann Wine Cellars, which he joined in 2006. He became a Master of Wine in 2010, writing his dissertation on ripeness trends in California and winning

the Madame Bollinger Medal for excellence in the tasting exam. He has judged at the Decanter World Wine Awards since 2005.

Piotr Pietras MS



Pietras is a wine consultant who was most recently at the Michelin-starred Hide in London. He became a Master Sommelier in 2017, winning the Amorim Scholarship for the highest blind

tasting score, and placed second in the Best Sommelier of Europe 2017 and Best Young Sommelier of the World 2017 competitions.

OUTSTANDING 95-97pts



Ridge Vineyards, Monte Bello, Santa Cruz Mountains

Decanter average score: 95/100pts Individual judges' scores: Stephen Brook 95 Alex Hunt MW 95 Piotr Petras MS 95

£170 Roberson

Ridge can trace the first vintage of wine being made from the Monte Bello site back to 1892, and this rich history of production is certainly matched by the esteem in which the wine is held today. The expert hand of chief winemaker Paul Draper (Decanter Hall of Fame 2000) ensured another successful vintage from this iconic Californian estate in 2010, which concluded with the wine spending 18 months in US oak barrels.

Stephen Brook Refined blackcurrant and garrigue nose. Herbal but not herbaceous. Quite rich and solid, concentrated and firm, with a good tannic backbone. This is robust and structured, with refreshing acidity on the long finish. Still plenty of life in it. Delicious!

Alex Hunt MW Masterful composure on the nose. Some tannin (possibly wood-derived) to resolve, but there is abundantly classy and precise blue and black berry fruit, and real richness of flavour achieved without resorting to high ripeness and alcohol. Still very young; a long-term bet.

Piotr Petras MS Fruit-driven, spicy and chocolatey aromas. The palate is generous and dense, yet showing firm tannins and a characterful, stony character. Very well made.

Drink 2022-2035 Alcohol 13%



Vellum, Napa Valley 95 SB 96 AH 95 PP 94

N/A UK www.vellumwines.com

Founded in 2003 by friends Karl Lehmann and Jeff Mathy, Vellum's inaugural vintage was in 2007. Care is taken in the vineyard to prevent over-ripening, which helps to promote balancing acidity. Such practices, along with the exclusive use of French oak, ensure a distinctly Old World take on a Californian wine. Inspiration from Bordeaux is further evident in the rest of the range, which also includes a Petit Verdot, a Merlot and a Sauvignon Blanc-Semillon blend.

SB Reticent blackberry and black cherry nose. Medium-bodied and silky, this has freshness and finesse, with fine-grained tannins supporting the cool fruit. The texture and poise make this very appealing and there's subtlety on the long finish.

AH The level of leafy aroma makes this wine an outlier of the tasting, but I love it: it's fresh and appetising, and decorates plenty of rich currant fruit. Chewy and persistent on the palate, it is not yet ready, but has a lithe cohesion that promises plenty of excitement to come.

PP A combination of red fruit, vegetal notes and spices. Precise and lean on the palate with a long finish. Very charming!

Drink 2021-2030 Alc 14%

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED 90-94pts



Barnett, Spring Mountain, Napa Valley 93 SB 93 AH 94 PP 92

N/A UK www.barnettvineyards.com

Minty but vibrant blackcurrant nose; leafy and lifted. On the palate, there is enormous drive and linear richness, and a sense of precision and energy to the focused cassis fruit. A really long, purposeful and exhilarating wine.

Drink 2019-2029 Alc 14%



Cade, Estate, Howell Mountain, Napa Valley 93 SB 94 AH 92 PP 92

N/A UK www.cadewinery.com

Beautiful nose of dark fruit and oriental spice. Rich and suave, full-bodied and velvety, this is very concentrated and majestic. It shows the solidity of mountain fruit without the harsh tannins that often go with it. This has energy and punch. Drink 2021-2030 Alc 14%



Ramey, Pedregal Vineyard, Oakville, Napa Valley

93 SB 96 AH 88 PP 94

N/A UK www.rameywine.com

Dominant crème caramel notes on the nose. Supple attack that is silky and polished, elegant but concentrated. Fine, bright acidity gives persistence and the oak is subtle and not overstated. Drink 2021-2032 Alc 14.5% >

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HIGHLY RECOMMENDED (Continued) 90-94pts



Corison, Kronos Vineyard, Napa Valley 92 SB 93 AH 93 PP 89

£95 Roberson
Complex, especially for a 100% Cabernet Sauvignon, showcasing multiple aspects of the variety's personality: blackcurrant, chocolate and graphite, nicely supported by toasty oak. **Drink** 2019-2026 **Alc** 14%



Kenwood Vineyards, Artist Series, Sonoma County 92 SB 93 AH 93 PP 91

N/A UK www.kenwoodvineyards.com
Firm blackberry nose with ample oak presence and a forthright fruitiness. Fine, expressive palate with lots of savoury interest - graphite and herbaceous notes alongside subtle berry fruit. **Drink** 2019-2028 **Alc** 14.5%



Black Stallion, Bucephalus, Napa Valley 91 SB 93 AH 89 PP 90

£150 www.blackstallionwinery.com
Sharp, precise blackcurrant nose that is oaky and stylish. Fresh attack - juicy and vibrant - with ample concentration and a velvety texture. It is nicely structured and has a long, spicy finish. **Drink** 2019-2029 **Alc** 14.5%



Black Stallion, Transcendent, Napa Valley 91 SB 88 AH 94 PP 92

£200 Bancroft Wines
Elegant nose of cassis, dark raspberry and violets. The oak is present at just the right level to add a savoury dimension, and the balance of acidity to fruit extract ensures a satisfying grip without dominating the fruit. **Drink** 2019-2027 **Alc** 14.5%



Groth, Reserve, Oakville, Napa Valley 91 SB 93 AH 91 PP 89

N/A UK www.grothwines.com
Composed yet plush - aromatically this is a class act for sure. Rich and velvety, yet supported by firm tannins, it has power and density. This is pulling out a lot of stops and is hardly shy, but on its own terms it's successful. Taut and long. **Drink** 2021-2029 **Alc** 14.5%



Lail Vineyards, J Daniel Cuvée, Napa Valley 91 SB 89 AH 93 PP 91

N/A UK www.lailvineyards.com
Characterised by dark blackcurrant fruit aromas and sweet baking spices. The rich, spicy palate has silky tannins which give fine elegance. Long finish. **Drink** 2021-2028 **Alc** 14%



Larkmead, Solari, Napa Valley 91 SB 93 AH 90 PP 91

N/A UK www.larkmead.com
Lean blackcurrant nose with a herbaceous edge that gives charm and nuance. Rich and concentrated on the palate with a mineral touch to it. **Drink** 2019-2029 **Alc** 14.5%



PlumpJack, Estate, Oakville, Napa Valley 91 SB 94 AH 87 PP 91

N/A UK www.plumpjackwinery.com
There's a dark, raisined aspect to the nose here along with liquorice, violets and sweet spices. Suave and polished, with admirable concentration and little undue extraction. **Drink** 2019-2030 **Alc** 14%



Rombauer Vineyards, Diamond Selection, Napa Valley 91 SB 91 AH 90 PP 93

N/A UK www.rombauer.com
Brisk black berry fruits and rich espresso notes on the nose. There's spice on the palate with finely grained tannins and a long finish. **Drink** 2019-2026 **Alc** 14%



Staglin Family Vineyards, Rutherford, Napa Valley 91 SB 92 AH 89 PP 93

N/A UK www.staglinfamily.com
Toasty black fruits and eucalyptus aromas - imposing and forthright. The palate is voluptuous and dense, but with polished tannins and appealing sucrosity without over-maturity. **Drink** 2019-2029 **Alc** 14%



Tor, Beckstoffer To Kalon, Anniversary Cuvée, Napa Valley 91 SB 93 AH 89 PP 91

£168.99 Ministry of Drinks, Vineyard Cellars
Understated and focused aromas of pure, ripe Cabernet fruit. Plenty of spice here to lift the finish, and some coffee tones too. Quite long. **Drink** 2020-2029 **Alc** 14.5%



Beringer, Private Reserve, Napa Valley 90 SB 92 AH 92 PP 86

N/A UK www.beringer.com
Ripe, toasty blackcurrant nose that is quite vibrant and perfumed. Rich and lush palate with an upfront opulence but firm tannins behind the glossy fruit. **Drink** 2019-2027 **Alc** 14.5%

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED (Continued) 90–94pts



Cliff Lede, Stags Leap District, Napa Valley 90 SB 92 AH 88 PP 90

£100 Four Corners Wine, Vineyard Cellars
The combination of polished oak and stylish black fruits on the nose is beguiling. Rich and voluptuous, very concentrated and chocolatey. **Drink** 2020–2029 **Alc** 15%



Dunn Vineyards, Howell Mountain, Napa Valley 90 SB 93 AH 86 PP 91

N/A UK www.dunnvineyards.com
This has toasty blackcurrant aromas of compelling depth. The palate is rich, creamy and full-bodied with a long, spice-driven finish. **Drink** 2019–2029 **Alc** 14%



Frank Family Vineyards, Rutherford, Reserve, Napa Valley 90 SB 92 AH 86 PP 92

N/A UK www.frankfamilyvineyards.com
Rich and supple with an appealing silkiness and freshness. Understated and showing charm rather than power, this may lack heft but has balance and elegance. **Drink** 2020–2028 **Alc** 14%



Frog's Leap, Rutherford, Napa Valley 90 SB 90 AH 91 PP 90

POA FMV Wines
A lovely graphite note offsets the inherent richness of aroma here. Throughout the palate there's an appealing tension between sweet and savoury, plush and grippy. **Drink** 2019–2028 **Alc** 14%

‘These are refreshing but still fruit driven, and recognisable as Californian Cabernet’

Piotr Pietras MS



Jordan, Alexander Valley, Sonoma County 90 SB 91 AH 88 PP 92

POA House of Townend
Concentrated nose of cassis, mulberry and dark raspberry with vanilla and clove notes. Medium-bodied, fresh and stylish, with fine precision and some delicacy. **Drink** 2019–2028 **Alc** 13.5%



Mayacamas, Mt Veeder, Napa Valley 90 SB 86 AH 93 PP 90

£89 Roberson
Fragrant nose of blackcurrant, raspberry and sweet spices. The palate is rather lean and delicately vegetal and has a good length. **Drink** 2021–2028 **Alc** 13%



Mount Eden Vineyards, Santa Cruz Mountains 90 SB 88 AH 88 PP 94

£55 Roberson
Very elegant nose of blackcurrant, plums and raspberries accompanied by pencil shavings, cigar box and damp earth notes. **Drink** 2021–2028 **Alc** 13.5%



Rodney Strong, Alexander Valley, Symmetry, Sonoma County 90 SB 92 AH 86 PP 91

£95 The Wine Treasury
Oakly blackcurrant nose, with a light herbal tone that gives an appetising, edgy quality. Attractive poise and freshness rounded off by a long finish. **Drink** 2020–2026 **Alc** 14.5%



Signorello, Padrone, Napa Valley 90 SB 88 AH 92 PP 90

N/A UK www.signorelloestate.com
A gentle currant and mint nose, with a bit of toasty oak in support. There's a nice graphite edge to the palate which adds an extra dimension, while the structure is grippy but never overbearing. **Drink** 2020–2029 **Alc** 14%



Snowden, Reserve, Napa Valley 90 SB 88 AH 92 PP 90

£70 Stannary St Wine Co
An appealing blend of super-ripe fruit aromas along with a fresher, more herbaceous lift. The palate is very dense, yet with firm, tight tannins. **Drink** 2020–2028 **Alc** 15%



St Supéry, Elu, Napa Valley 90 SB 91 AH 88 PP 92

£65 Jeroboams
Lean but lifted blackberry and menthol nose. The palate is fresh, limpid and pure, with considerable charm and finesse. **Drink** 2019–2027 **Alc** 15% ➤