

Premium Napa Valley Wines



For decades California was known for reasonably priced wines that contrasted sharply with the expensive, iconic wines of Bordeaux and Burgundy. However, that price gap has closed in recent years as California producers feel their red wines are every bit as good and have priced their wines accordingly.



We've often mused over which Napa Valley producers would qualify as a first-growth, the top tier of a controversial classification established in the Medoc in 1855. Only five chateaus made the cut; another one was added in 1973. The selection was based mostly on who was making the most expensive wine.

If the same criteria were applied to Napa Valley wines, the first-growths would be Screaming Eagle at \$2,500 a bottle, Harlan, Opus One, Colgin, Bryant and Scarecrow to name just a few. Napa producers making a trifling \$200 wines – and there are many – wouldn't even be considered.



growth-quality wines today.

If history was a factor in ranking top wines, there are only a handful of Napa Valley producers who were around in the late 19th century. Among them are Chateau Montelena, Beaulieu Vineyards, Chappellet, Spottswoode, Charles Krug, Beringer, Freemark Abbey and Inglenook. But over time these wineries have changed ownership and, in some cases, aren't making first-

By 1975 more top producers were releasing their premium wines – Caymus, Joseph Phelps, Ridge, Louis Martini, Robert Mondavi, Heitz, Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, Shafer, Sullivan to name a few. Napa Valley was in full swing then.

History and cost aside, though, who would you say produces first-growth-quality cabernets in Napa Valley today?

Any answer is steeped in bias, of course. And, there are many more than five top producers who should make the cut. However, you would have to include Chateau Montelena, Caymus, Joseph Phelps, Chappellet and Heitz among the cabernet producers who have been around a long time and still making legendary wines.

We haven't had the privilege of tasting the uber-expensive cabernet sauvignons, so we can't attest to their first-growth quality. However, there is a plethora of cabernets selling for \$100 to \$200 a bottle that one could argue are a bargain when compared to a \$1,000 Colgin cabernet.

If there is ever a year to indulge in reckless luxury, it's 2020. Here are a few legendary cabernet sauvignons we have recently tasted that would make special holiday gifts for special people or yourself:

- **Chateau Montelena Estate Cabernet Sauvignon 2016** (\$175).

With a history that dates back to 1882, Chateau Montelena is an indisputable icon in Napa Valley. Although its chardonnay got the attention for besting French burgundy in the 1976 Judgment of Paris wine competition, its cabernet sauvignon deserves the gold. This wine has a stunning, deep bouquet of red berries and dense black fruit flavors with hints of tea, leather and coffee. As a substitute, consider the 2017 Chateau Montelena Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$65).