

FOOD & WINE

25 Splurge-Worthy California Reds

These wines represent what I consider to be some of the best high-end bottles in the state—and, for many of them, the world.

By **Brian Freedman** | November 06, 2019

When I set out to compile this list of 25 splurge-worthy red wines from California, I knew I'd have a difficult task ahead. As a lifelong drinker and collector of wines from the state, I knew the quality would be high. What I *didn't* expect was just how fraught the process of narrowing down my selections would be. This list could have run to 40 bottles, easily.

Tasting dozens upon dozens of wines, all with a minimum suggested retail price of \$100, was fascinating, educational, delicious, and occasionally exhausting. But it wasn't monolithic. Because while it's still frustratingly common to hear otherwise well-versed wine lovers say that they just don't like California reds—as if the state is a single terroir with one style shared among all producers—the truth is that the state's wine culture is a lot more varied, interesting, and rewarding than that vinous stereotype implies.

While the lion's share of these wines are Cabernet Sauvignons or Cab-based blends, and predominantly from Napa and Sonoma—they, after all, tend to command the highest prices—there are some standout bottles of Merlot, Pinot Noir, and Cabernet Franc-based wines here too, and from other parts of the state.

My only wish is that the next time I embark on a project like this, I'll find more wines from other varieties as well—Syrah perhaps, or Grenache—that aim to justify prices in this ballpark. But that's also a good thing for consumers: Syrah from Pax, Pinot Noir

from Kutch and Brewer-Clifton, Rhône varieties from Bonny Doon: All of them and more produce stellar wines that can be found for less than \$100 and over-deliver in a big way.

But I can't complain. These 25 reds represent what I consider to be some of the most splurge-worthy in the state—and, for many of them, the world. I've tried to balance the selections between widely accessible options and less-common gems that might take a bit of digging to find. They also represent a range of styles. All of them are worth the effort to look for.

In addition to these, I heartily recommend snapping up the Star Lane “Astral” from Santa Barbara's Happy Canyon, Sullivan's “James O'Neill” Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon from Rutherford, Sea Smoke's “Ten” Pinot Noir from the Sta. Rita Hills, Justin's “Isosceles” Reserve from Paso Robles, and Cabernets from Mayacamas, Peter Michael, Palmaz, Merus, Heitz, Gamble (notably their “Family Home”), Torcia's Abela Vineyard, and so many more that I couldn't include in this list for one reason or another but that are also excellent—delicious now and worthy additions to any collection.

So, explore the category of splurge-worthy reds as widely as possible, at least as far as your budget allows. They are as exciting and varied as I can ever recall. Here 25 of my my favorites, listed alphabetically.

2016 Cliff Lede Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley (\$185)

A dense, rich swirl of baker's chocolate, cassis, sun-warmed wild strawberries, cigar humidor, and balsamic notes set the stage for a palate that carries flavors of bing and black cherries, sarsaparilla, and licorice root alongside flashes of sachertorte, black raspberries, ripe plums, and toasted fennel seed and cardamom. Give it a few years, and then enjoy through the 2040s.

2015 Shafer “Hillside Select” Cabernet Sauvignon Stags Leap District, Napa Valley (\$310)

Monumental from the very first sniff: Lifted black licorice, star anise, toasted caraway seeds, and plum-spice cake lead to a palate dripping with sweet, generous fruit—plums, blackberries, mulberries, huckleberries—as well as blueberries, purple-blossomed flowers, Chinese five-spice powder, and gunflint minerality. This is so generous and ripe, yet kept in check by serious structure that, though it's totally irresistible right now, will carry this through the next 25 years or more. But I wouldn't be able to wait that long.

2015 Taylor Family Vineyards “Cumulus” Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley (\$225)

Proof that power and elegance can coexist in Napa, this smells of brambly berries, floral black peppercorns, and a hit of charred sage alongside five-spice powder and plum cake. On the palate, this is a mouth-filling Cab that never sacrifices structure for lushness. Flavors of black figs, hoisin sauce, ramen broth, blackberries, mulberries, and currants precede a finish that's gorgeously savory, with a bone-marrow-like character to the purple plums and mulberries, wrapping up with a hint of blueberry conserve.