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# TOP 100 WINES OF UNITED STATES 2020

Tuesday, December 1, 2020

## 100 Tasting Notes



The vineyards of Corison soak up the morning sun including the old vines of Kronos.

You might rub your eyes in disbelief but it's true – our two top Wines of the Year from the United States are chardonnays. We are sending a message that white wines, particularly chardonnay, now represent some of the best wines in America.

Our No. 1 wine, the Peter Michael Winery Chardonnay Sonoma County Knights Valley Belle-Cote 2017 (99 points) and No. 2 Aubert Chardonnay Napa Valley Sugar Shack Estate Vineyard 2017 (also 99 points) are some of the most exciting wines we tasted all year. They have all the pizzazz and excitement of the best chardonnays in the world including the most coveted bottles from Burgundy. Yet they have a distinct character with a reserved! ambience of vibrant fruit and exuberant oak and terroir highlights. Plus, they are relative bargains for the quality – \$130 and \$180 a bottle respectively – compared to most highly rated and coveted bottles of red from California.

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“You had to work smart,” said Nicolas Morlet, the winemaker of Peter Michael winery, about how he made such intense 2017 whites without being over the top. “They have some elegance, and the structure will let them age well.”

Mark Aubert added when I tasted his 2017s (the 2018s are arriving now) with him in late October 2019: “People will certainly remember 2017 with the fire but the wines are unique in their style as well. And I will take it as we worked hard and made something special.”



Wines arrive chez Suckling in Napa for tastings earlier this year.



Winemaker Andy Erickson sits with his bottle of To Kalon Vineyard Co. Napa Valley Oakville Highest Beauty 2016 in January in Napa.



Indeed, the 2017 harvest was marked by a massive fire on the hillsides of Napa; however, most of the grapes were harvested well before the October fire started, so there was very little smoke taint. But working in the wineries was a problem for some due to access issues and electricity cut offs, among others. Still, I found many well-made and nicely balanced 2017 whites and reds and most are very attractive to drink now, though the best will age very well. About two out of three of the bottles in the Top 100 USA list are from the 2017 vintage. Nearly all were reds.

This year's Top 100 Wines from the United States covers mostly cabernet sauvignon or cabernet sauvignon-based reds (46), pinot noirs (20) and chardonnays (13). California, as always, dominated the list with 66 wines followed by Oregon (19), Washington (14) and Virginia (1). We wish we had had more time to taste more non-West Coast wines this year. We rated more than 2,220 US wines over the last 12 months compared to just over 3,000 in 2019.

We are excited to include so many wines from Oregon and Washington in our list. The two states are making terrific whites and reds and at excellent prices compared to so many top wines from California. It seems \$40 to \$60 will buy some incredible bottles from fruity and succulent pinots from Oregon to bold and savory syrahs from Washington.

"We have a lot of the character of other New World areas but the wines have the restraint of what you get out of Burgundy at the same time," said Brennon Leighton of K Vintners. "You have the best of both worlds." His K Vintners Syrah Wahluke Slope The Hidden 2017 (98 points) was our No. 5 wine this year and it sells for about \$60 a bottle. I loved its intensity and flavor with plenty of varietal character and the fine-grained tannins that framed the wine. The No. 11 K Vintners Syrah Walla Walla Valley Phil Lane 2017 (98 points) was equally impressive.



Nick Stock tastes some Washington wines in James' house in St. Helena.

The same also could be said about many pinot noirs from Oregon in our list, such as the No. 10 wine, Antica Terra Pinot Noir Eola-Amity Hills Antikythera 2017 (98 points). Winemaker and owner Maggie Harrison is a true student of Burgundy but she searches for her own unique character in her wines from her unique soils and microclimates.

However, it's impossible to deny that California's Napa and Sonoma counties have a massive footprint on the world of great wines from the United States. Besides the first two chardonnays, the new super cabernet sauvignon from Constellation Brands with ace winemaker Andy Erickson from some of the best plots of the famous To Kolan Vineyard was our No. 3 and highlights the continued prowess of Napa for incredible cabernets. Constellation gave Erickson the keys to To Kolan and told him to make 600 cases from the best grapes he could find in the superb 2016 vintage and he crushed it. And it sells for \$200 a bottle.

The Abreu Napa Valley Las Posadas 2017 was my only 100-point wine from the United States in 2020 and I placed it at No. 4 because of its hefty price of about \$600 per bottle, but it is a phenomenal single vineyard wine from the 2017 vintage. It's precision and focus in complex fruit and fine-grained tannins is a tribute to the incredible talents of winemaker Brad Grimes, both in the cellar and the vineyard.

Carlo Mondavi and his brother Dante are also devoted vineyardist and are now make some of the best pinots in Sonoma in my opinion. They show why I continue to be so excited about California's coastal pinots, particularly the Sonoma coast. And their wines show soulful character with a cool exuberance and firm frame work of tannins and acidity. I placed the RAEN Pinot Noir Sonoma County Sonoma Coast Freestone Occidental Bodega Vineyard 2018 (98 points) at No. 6 in our list.



The No. 1 American wine Peter Michael Winery Chardonnay Sonoma County Knights Valley Belle-Cote 2017 sits with the newest vintage of the No. 2 wine Aubert Chardonnay Napa Valley Sugar Shack Estate Vineyard 2017 at James Suckling Wine Central in Hong Kong.

Bottles of rocking K Vintners from Washington sit ready to taste at James Suckling Wine Central for a Zoom call with the winery.



The remainder of the wines were well-known cabernet sauvignons, one for being an up-and-coming cult and the other two for being from well-established names. The latter pair are relative bargains for all the depth of fruit and solid structure for around \$150 a bottle: Sterling Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Yountville Sleeping Lady Vineyard 2016 and Beringer Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Private Reserve 2017. The Dana Estates Napa Valley Rutherford Helms Vineyard 2017 is more than three times the price but its polish, balance and finesse with power highlights why it had to be in the Top 10 this year and a continued favorite.

I did my best to taste and rate a large selection of American wines with Nick Stock over the last 12 months despite all the obstacles the pandemic threw at us. I tasted a large number of the wines in Hong Kong instead of in my house in St. Helena or in wineries in the United States. But it was worth all the effort and it's exciting to see a broad range of outstanding and superb quality wines offering an array of flavors and character as well as prices from America this year.

I ranked the wines in this list first on quality (scores) and then prices. And finally I used what I call the "wow factor." These are wines that wow me and make me want to buy and drink them. The wines below are indeed some wines that should wow you too.

*– James Suckling, CEO & editor*