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A Beginner's Guide to California Wines

It's the most important wine-producing area in the U.S. and offers a rich diversity of wine to enjoy.

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Wine is one of California's most important industries, but it wasn't always that way. Although today the mention of California wine country brings to mind acres of endless, sun-dappled vineyards, the most famous vineyard sites were once home to prune and almond orchards.

When our founding fathers enjoyed fine wines, they were drinking French wines, as well as sherry and Madeira. But in 1848, when gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill, waves of pioneers rushed to the San Francisco Bay and the demand for local wines rose at the same rapid rate. Intrepid farmers brought cuttings of "mission" grapevines up from Mexico and planted them. Soon European immigrants saw the opportunity to bring Old World vines to California. The fact that in the late 19th century, European vineyards were devastated by an attack of phylloxera (an aphid that destroys the roots of grapevines), only increased interest and investment in California wine-growing—and the fine wine industry was born.

But this boom was short-lived: In 1920, wine production was forced to grind to a halt when Prohibition made it illegal to produce, sell, transport, or consume alcoholic beverages. By the time Prohibition ended thirteen years later, the industry was all but dead. It wasn't until 1965 when Napa Valley icon Robert Mondavi established his winery that the modern era of California winemaking began. Here are the main California wine regions to know in the 21st century.

Napa Valley

It was the Napa Valley that showed the world that California could produce world-class wines. In 1976 two Napa wines, Chateau Montelena Chardonnay and Stag's Leap Wine Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon, won against their French counterparts in a blind wine competition. Today, cabernet is king in Napa Valley. There are 16 sub-regions (called American Viticultural Areas or AVAs) in Napa, and each has a distinct combination of soil types and climate conditions that influence the character of the wines. Cabernet sauvignon from mountainside AVAs (Mount Veeder, Diamond Mountain, Spring Mountain, Atlas Peak, and Howell Mountain) has concentration, dark fruit aromatics, and high acidity. Cabernet from the sunny valley floor areas of Yountville, Oakville, Stags Leap District, Calistoga, St. Helena, and Rutherford is softer and more supple.

Benchmark examples of Napa cabernet include Louis Martini Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon 2017 (\$35.99, [wine.com](#)), Charles Krug Cabernet Sauvignon 2016 (\$24.97, [totalwine.com](#)), Inglenook 1882 Cabernet Sauvignon 2015 (\$38.99, [wine.com](#)), and Frank Family Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon 2016 (\$54.99, [wine.com](#)). Napa Valley cabernet pairs well with [Pan-Seared Steak with Salsa Verde](#). Although cabernet is the red wine star, you'll also find zinfandel, merlot, cabernet franc, syrah, and pinot noir from Napa.

For white wines, chardonnay is also widely grown in Napa Valley: We recommend Far Niente Chardonnay 2018 (\$69.99, [wine.com](#)) and Cakebread Chardonnay 2018 (\$42.99, [wine.com](#)). Pair a Napa Valley chardonnay with [Roast Chicken with Meyer Lemons and Potatoes](#). Less predominant than chardonnay but still a part of the Napa scene is sauvignon blanc; we love Duckhorn Sauvignon Blanc 2018 (\$26.99, [wine.com](#)) and Frog's Leap Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc 2018 (\$22.99, [wine.com](#)). Both pair nicely with casual fare like [California-Style Veggie Burgers](#) or [West Coast Grilled Vegetable Pizza](#).

Sonoma

Directly to the west of Napa lies Sonoma. It spans 50 miles of scenic Pacific coastline and is home to 18 AVAs. The Sonoma coast is where you'll find the coolest temperatures; cold ocean air and fog create ideal conditions for bright and lean styles of pinot noir and chardonnay. Try La Crema Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir 2017 (\$21.99, [wine.com](#)) or Hanzell Winemaker's Selection "Sebella" Chardonnay (\$36, [hanzell.com](#)) with [Green Salad with Roast Chicken and Sweet Potato](#).

The Russian River Valley has a more moderate climate and is also known for pinot noir and chardonnay, made in a more round and fruity style. Benovia Russian River Chardonnay 2017 (\$37.99, [wine.com](#)) is an incredible pair with [Cedar-Planked Salmon](#), and we also like Flowers Russian River Pinot

Noir 2017 (\$52.99, [wine.com](https://www.wine.com)) with [Grilled Heritage Pork with Plums, Farro Verde, and Summer Herbs](#).

Bordeaux varieties like cabernet sauvignon and merlot grow in the warmer, northern Sonoma AVAs: Alexander Valley, Knights Valley, and Dry Creek Valley. And on the south end of Sonoma lies Carneros, where cool breezes drift off the San Pablo Bay, and the area is ideal for making sparkling wines.

Domaine Carneros Cuvee de la Pompadour Brut

Rose (\$38.99, [wine.com](https://www.wine.com)) and Gloria Ferrer Blanc de

Blancs (\$20.99, [wine.com](https://www.wine.com)) are both top-level sparklers. Toast with them solo or try them with [Seared Scallops with Bacon, Tomato, and Avocado Puree](#).

Paso Robles

Located about halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco, Paso Robles encompasses 614,000 acres of diverse soils and climates with a wide range of grape varieties being grown. No matter what wine styles you enjoy, there's something for everyone in Paso. The local culture supports small family producers; in fact, two-thirds of the wineries produce 5,000 cases a year or less.

Lovers of classic California cabernet will drink well with DAOU Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon 2018 (\$26.99, [wine.com](https://www.wine.com)) or Justin Cabernet Sauvignon 2017 (\$27.99, [wine.com](https://www.wine.com)), paired with [Balsamic Steak with Garlic Zucchini](#).

Grape varieties that originated in France's Rhône Valley, such as grenache, syrah, and mourvedre are used to make stunning red blends in Paso Robles.

We recommend Zenaida Cellars Wanderlust

2017 (\$48, [zenaidacellars.com](https://www.zenaidacellars.com)) and Rancho Cellars Grenache

2018 (\$36, [ranchoocellars.com](https://www.ranchoocellars.com)). These robust blends are ideal with grilled

meat dishes like [Rib-Eye with Jalapeno Butter](#). Prefer a lighter expression of

these blends? Ledge MCA Rosé 2017 (\$29.99, [wine.com](https://www.wine.com)) is as delightful and pure as any top-level French rosé. Italian grape varieties also have a following

in Paso Robles: Bella Luna Estate Winery Barbera

2015 (\$45, bellalunawinery.com) can be enjoyed with fresh pasta like Ravioli Stuffed with Kale, Prosciutto, and Marjoram.

Santa Barbara

California's Central Coast is home to up-and-coming wine regions that are less famous than Napa and Sonoma, but are making waves for their interesting, unique styles. Among them are Monterey, Livermore Valley, Santa Clara Valley, and the Santa Cruz Mountains. A great place to start exploring the wines of the Central Coast is Santa Barbara.

As the site of one of California's original missions, Santa Barbara is one of the oldest wine-growing regions in California, and it's home to AVAs Santa Rita Hills, Happy Canyon of Santa Barbara, Ballard Canyon, and Los Olivos District (all located in the Santa Ynez Valley). White wine lovers should try Sandhi Santa Barbara Chardonnay 2018 (\$26.99, wine.com) or Au Bon Climat Los Alamos Chardonnay 2017 (\$29.99, wine.com) with Pesto Yogurt Roast Chicken.

Red wine lovers will find exemplary pinot noirs, like Presqu'ile Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir 2016 (\$43.99, wine.com), fantastic paired with Roasted Pork Tenderloin with Fig Chutney. Santa Barbara is also becoming increasingly well known for syrah and grenache. Try Stolpman Vineyards Estate Grown Syrah 2017 (\$29.99, wine.com) or A Tribute to Grace Santa Barbara County Grenache 2017 (\$32.99, wine.com) with Roasted Leg of Lamb with Asparagus and Herbs.

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