

# EVERY WINE REGION IS A GIFT

The holiday season is the perfect time for wine discovery.

*Elaine Chukan Brown reviews the wines of Napa Valley*

December brings great options for creative drinking. Cooler temperatures call for hearty red wines. Holiday festivities encourage bubbles, rosé and energetic whites. Meals with family and friends prove a perfect time to try a new wine. From Napa Valley, the 2021 vintage stands out. It's an ideal combination of upfront flavor with the structure to last. These wines can be enjoyed now with friends and a fireplace or held for later. With more bottle age they gain savory depth.

The region is known for Cabernet Sauvignon but don't sleep on its other reds. Both the Cabernet and Merlot from Frog's Leap deserve attention. Zinfandel in the valley has never been better. Robert Biale delivers finesse with flavor. Ridge is known for working with more vineyards in its history than any other producer. They're back to Napa Valley with their Green & Red vineyard Zin. And these wines only improve a meal.

When celebrating, mouthwatering wine keeps the energy popping. Napa's secret weapon remains Sauvignon Blanc. It's combination of aromatic verve, lightning-fast acidity, and generous flavor make it an ideal white wine. Reach for the 2023 vintage. Producers

like Titus, Pahlmeyer and Beaulieu Vineyard are delicious. For a touch more richness, look to Fumé Blanc on the label, like the Block 3 from One Hope. Still a California classic, Chardonnay remains a favorite. It's called the red wine lovers' white wine. Massican from Hyde does well with decanting and has the hutzpah to age.

But there is no better guide to trying new styles than the reviews of my colleagues.

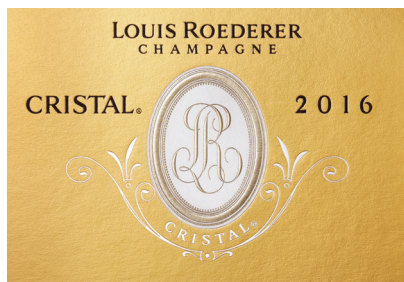
“There is no better guide to trying new styles than the reviews of my colleagues. Together they reveal the whole world of wine.”

Together they reveal the whole world of wine. Hidden gems give options for sparkling wine. Valdobbiadene Prosecco from Ca'dei Zago, Franciacorta from Barone Pizzini or Ca'del Bosco are three I'll be enjoying. For unusual bubbles, opt for Day Sparkling Nero d'Avola from Applegate Val-

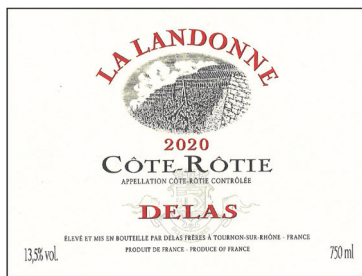
ley. From Napa, the Brick & Mortar Block House Brut Rosé might be their best.

And there's other top bets. For California pioneer, Calera, the Jensen wins. From further north, wager on the Eyrie South Block. For Tuscany, reach for Merlot from Masseto. Best buys pour from the California appellation. You can't go wrong with Francis Ford Coppola Black Label Claret and Kendall Jackson Vintner's Reserve for both Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay.

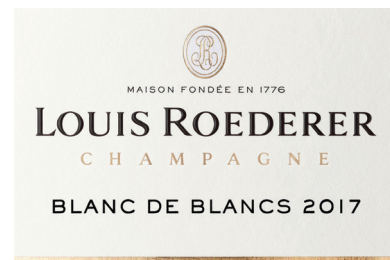
It's a pleasure to delight in December!



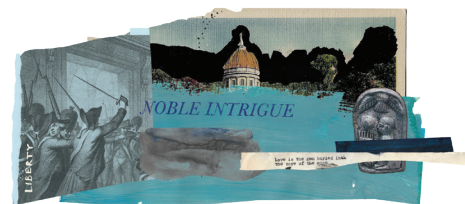
**98 Louis Roederer 2016 Cristal Brut (Champagne).** This Champagne, first made in the 19th century for the Tsar of Russia, shows its typical stunning balance and poise between richness and concentration. It has a pure white-fruit and honeysuckle aroma and tight, tangy fresh fruit flavors. Maisons Marques & Domaines USA. *Cellar Selection.* —R.V.  
**abv:** 12.5% **Price:** \$400



**97 Delas Frères 2020 La Landonne (Côte-Rôtie).** Sappy and mineral-laden aromas weave through black plum, boysenberry, violets, lavender, and fresh vanilla, layered with savory herbs and a hint of meatiness. The palate is textured and silky, framing touches of mushroom and iodine. Maisons Marques & Domaines USA. *Cellar Selection.* —A.C.C.  
**abv:** 13.5% **Price:** \$340



**96 Louis Roederer 2017 Blanc de Blancs Brut (Champagne).** Produced from selected parcels in Avize on the Côte des Blancs, this Champagne shows minerality and tension. While it has aged well, it still has vibrant freshness, from the lemon and brioche aroma and the tangy, citrus and spice flavors. The wine is textured and sure to age further. Maisons Marques & Domaines USA. —R.V.  
**abv:** 12.5% **Price:** \$110



**96 ONX 2021 Noble Intrigue Bien Nacido Vineyard Syrah (Santa Maria Valley).** Lovely and rich aromas of lush dark fruits are cut by a savory charcoal kick on the nose of this bottling from the X and II blocks of this historic property. The palate's generous red and purple fruit flavors are enlivened by baking spice, cracked pepper, a racy acidity and edgy texture. *Cellar Selection.* —M.K.  
**abv:** 14.1% **Price:** \$80



**96 Poggio al Tesoro 2020 Dedicato a Walter (Bolgheri Superiore).** The rich nose comes from aromas of sweet and tart blackberries, mulberries and currants, as well as notes of sugar plum, vanilla, toasted coconut and cedar, and then the savoriness of pepper and leather. The palate is full and luxurious with dark chocolate and more berries, but refined tannins reinforce that peppery, leathery backbone. Maze Row Wine Merchant. —D.C.  
**abv:** 15% **Price:** \$300

# BUYINGGUIDE

coating tannins and mouthwatering acidity for a sticky, ample finish with a lot of length. —E.C.B.  
**abv:** 14.5% **Price:** \$30

**90 Defiance 2020 Estate Cabernet Sauvignon (Paso Robles).** Ripe and tart dark fruit aromas meet with toasty spices on the nose of this bottling. The palate's rich blackberry and elderberry flavors are cut by a lightly sour edge. —M.K.  
**abv:** 14% **Price:** \$38

**90 Gunsight Rock 2022 Cabernet Sauvignon (Paso Robles).** For full review see page 16.  
*Best Buy.*  
**abv:** 14.5% **Price:** \$20

**90 Hall 2021 Cabernet Sauvignon (Diamond Mountain District).** Brawny, robust and powerful, this full-bodied Cabernet brings together the upright tannins of its mountain vineyard with savory, warmly spiced, dark fruits and desert herbs. Dusty earthy tannins and a lengthy finish. —E.C.B.  
**abv:** 15.4% **Price:** \$225

**90 Hall 2021 Cabernet Sauvignon (Stags Leap District).** Dripping ripe plums, warming spices and peppery length combine for this bold and concentrated Cabernet of velvety tannins, balanced acidity and profound length. Woodsy and savory. —E.C.B.  
**abv:** 15.7% **Price:** \$225

**90 LVE 2021 Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley).** Intense flavors and brawny, palate-coating while approachable tannins generate a full-bodied and persistent Cabernet Sauvignon. Dusty tobacco, sweet oak spice and black plum carry into a lengthy and chocolaty finish. —E.C.B.  
**abv:** 15% **Price:** \$95

**90 RouteStock 2022 Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley).** Rose petal and violet aromas spin through flavors of fleshy, ripe fruits—blackberries and black plum. Especially mouthwatering and persistent, this good value Cabernet is lengthy and perfect for meals with mixed company and a lot of fun. —E.C.B.  
**abv:** 14% **Price:** \$27

**90 Rutherford Ranch 2021 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley).** This robust and full-bodied Cabernet ushers in abundant flavors of cassis and clove, dried tobacco and an accent of pink grapefruit. Supple tannins with lots of length are balanced by mouthwatering acidity. —E.C.B.  
**abv:** 15% **Price:** \$75

**90 Wines by Alisa Jacobson 2021 Avec Moi Cabernet Sauvignon (Paso Robles).** For full review see page 17. *Best Buy.*  
**abv:** 13% **Price:** \$20

**89 Barrel Bomb 2022 Cabernet Sauvignon (Paso Robles).** The Kentucky bourbon barrel that this Cab spent time in isn't so apparent at first but winds up dominant by the finish. Lively aromas of oak and baked red fruits lead from the

nose into a likable fresh palate of blackberry fruit that's wrapped in chalky tannins. The whiskey pops after that. —M.K.  
**abv:** 15% **Price:** \$20

**89 Charles Woodson's Intercept 2021 Cabernet Sauvignon (Paso Robles).** Dark aromas of roasted fruit, oak, soy and pepper introduce the nose to this bottling. Anise and blackberry flavors are mixed with lightly bitter carob and oak spice on the palate. —M.K.  
**abv:** 14.5% **Price:** \$20

**89 Robert Hall 2020 Cavern Select Cabernet Sauvignon (Paso Robles).** Fresh and quite juicy aromas of blackberry jam invite the nose into this bottling. Soft, feathery tannins give just enough tension to the sip, where anise and dark strawberry fruit flavors converge. —M.K.  
**abv:** 15.5% **Price:** \$60

**88 Adelaida 2022 Cabernet Sauvignon (Paso Robles).** Muddled cherry, baking spice, wild mint and light loam aromas arise on the nose of this bottling. The palate is very ripe and moves into sweet flavors of cherry and strawberry, with a slightly minty kick. —M.K.  
**abv:** 15% **Price:** \$35

**88 Fog & Light 2021 Cabernet Sauvignon (Paso Robles).** Dried cranberry and cherry aromas meet with sandalwood on the nose of this bottling. There's an herbal tinge to the palate, which shows fennel, nori wrap and smoldering campfire flavors as well as a dark berry note. —M.K.  
**abv:** 14.5% **Price:** \$40

**88 Kirkland Signature 2021 Suscol Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley).** Smoky and woody aromatics spin into flavors of wet tobacco leaf, candied black fruits and mixed spices. A savory palate with fine tannins carries into a persistent finish. A crowd-pleasing go-to red wine. *Best Buy.* —E.C.B.  
**abv:** 14.5% **Price:** \$18

**88 Rabble 2022 Cabernet Sauvignon (Paso Robles).** Dark cherry and oak aromas meet with cappuccino and cocoa on the impressively fresh nose of this bottling. The palate is very juicy and nearly sweet, offering strawberry sorbet and lingering sea salt caramel flavors. —M.K.  
**abv:** 14.3% **Price:** \$22

**87 Kirkland Signature 2021 Cabernet Sauvignon (Oakville).** Richly aromatic and flavored, this approachable Cabernet delivers juicy black fruits spun through with spices and tobacco and a sprinkle of sweet cocoa. Prune emerges with further sipping. Mouthwatering and persistent, this is an incredible value. —E.C.B.  
**abv:** 14.5% **Price:** \$20

**85 Member's Mark 2022 Cabernet Sauvignon (Rutherford).** Black raisins and spiced sticky plum pudding combine with pipe tobacco and

a dusting of cocoa for a concentrated Cabernet with melting tannins and a lengthy finish. —E.C.B.  
**abv:** 14.5% **Price:** \$30

## PINOT NOIR

**97 Calera 2021 Jensen Vineyard Pinot Noir (Mt. Harlan).** An intense yet elegant density, loaded with aromas of strawberry, blueberry and wild mints, enlivens the nose in this bottling from a vineyard planted at 2,200 feet in 1975, now yielding less than a ton per acre. The palate is broad and juicy with wild currant flavors that are cut by star anise and singed pine needles. Drink now–2041. *Cellar Selection.* —M.K.  
**abv:** 14.5% **Price:** \$125

**97 Samsara 2022 Bentrack Vineyard Pinot Noir (Sta. Rita Hills).** There's no shortage of fruit, spice and herb to entertain the whole experience of this excellent bottling. Black raspberry, pomegranate and alpine strawberry are cut by tarragon and hibiscus-mint tea on the nose. The high-acidity palate is refreshing and vibrant, offering peppery spices that slice into the raspberry core. —M.K.  
**abv:** 13.4% **Price:** \$74

**95 Samsara 2022 La Encantada Vineyard Pinot Noir (Sta. Rita Hills).** Intense aromas of black cherry, cola, star anise and cracked pepper pop on the deliciously fruity and spicy nose of this single-vineyard expression. The black cherry core of the palate picks up nicely bitter touches of coffee bean leading into a finish of strawberry sauce, mace and French toast spices. —M.K.  
**abv:** 13.3% **Price:** \$74

**95 Seagrape 2022 Hibbits Ranch Vineyard Pinot Noir (Sta. Rita Hills).** Lovely aromas of raspberry, mulberry and black plum are decorated in complex waves of thyme and pepper on the nose of this single-vineyard expression from a vineyard just east of Lompoc. The zippy palate is brisk with pomegranate and raspberry flavors that are enlivened by sumac, cinnamon and blood orange touches. —M.K.  
**abv:** 13.5% **Price:** \$38

**94 Beauregard 2023 Carbonica Coast Grade Vineyard Pinot Noir (Ben Lomond Mountain).** Carbonic fermentation isn't so common on pricey Pinot Noir, but this bottling makes a good case for more exploration. Very light in the glass, this bottling pops on the nose with cranberry, strawberry, cinnamon, peppercorn and wet cement aromas. The palate is very grippy, framing flavors of cranberry, orange peel, thyme and pepper. *Hidden Gem.* —M.K.  
**abv:** 13.5% **Price:** \$65

**94 Beauregard 2022 Beauregard Ranch Pinot Noir (Ben Lomond Mountain).** Lush layers of black cherry and baked raspberry are cut by sumac, blood orange and grapefruit rinds and lovely spices on the nose of this single-vineyard expression. The palate picks up pine needle-like herbs and peppery