

101 BEST WINERIES IN AMERICA 2016

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CALERA #4

The sheer quantity and variety of good and great wine being made in this country has grown exponentially in recent decades. Wine is now produced in all 50 states, even Hawaii and Alaska (though admittedly the latter state's offerings are mostly made from fruits and berries, plus grape juice imported from more temperate climes), and there are bottles worth savoring from almost every source. Narrowing this enological wealth down to a mere 101 wineries nationwide, then, is a daunting task.

To help us meet the challenge, we reached out to about 50 experts in the field, from around the country — sommeliers, wine writers and bloggers (including our own contributors), chefs and restaurateurs, and, of course, the wine-savvy editors at *The Daily Meal* — asking them to nominate their favorite wineries (as many as 10 per person) and to tell us what they liked about them. Some of our respondents asked to remain anonymous, but we are happy to be able to acknowledge the assistance, in devising and ranking our list, of our regular wine writers Roger Morris, Andrew Chalk, Gabe Sasso, Anne Montgomery, and John Tilson (of *The Underground Wine Letter*); “Food and Wine Diva” Summer Whitford, who covers many subjects for us; chef-restaurateurs Alice Waters and Norman van Aken (both members of The Daily Meal Council); sommeliers David Sawyer of Husk in Charleston, Dan Davis of Commanders Palace in New Orleans, and Eduardo Bolaños of the Terroni Group restaurants in Los Angeles; Daniel Johannes, corporate wine director for Daniel Boulud’s Dinex Group; wine writers and bloggers Elizabeth Schneider, Keith Beavers, and Pamela Pajuelo; grocer extraordinaire and highly respected wine expert Darrell Corti (also a member of The Daily Meal Council); and Renée B. Allen, director of the Wine Institute of New England.

We ended up with a list of slightly more than 200 wineries, old and new, large and small, a number of them nominated numerous times. We collated the results, then factored in our own tasting notes of recent vintages, consulted the leading wine publications and newsletters, and considered recent awards from prestigious competitions.

We considered not just individual wines, though, but the overall place of each winery in the American wine scene. Is it a dependable veteran, tried and true? An audacious innovator? Does it specialize in just one or two grape varieties, or do a sterling job with 20? Is it representative of its corner of the wine country? Does it help, in one way or another, enhance the reputation of its region, and/or of American wine in general?

Though it wasn’t our main criterion, we also factored in quality-to-price ratio — in other words, value. Value doesn’t necessarily mean low price, of course, so there are some producers of very pricey wines represented here. But our consideration of value accounts in part for the absence from our list of some of famous “trophy wines” from the Napa Valley and elsewhere, wines priced at many hundreds of dollars on release and bought more often (we’re pretty sure) as status symbols rather than as delicious things to savor — though it is also worth noting that, for whatever reasons, our panel didn’t

vote for some of the most famous names at all.

In the nomination process, we asked our panel to consider not just the obvious places — California, the Pacific Northwest, New York State — but the entire country. The majority of our choices, 65 of the wineries listed, did turn out to be Californian; as noted, plenty of other places are doing a good job with wine, but the Golden State is still by far the largest producing state and still boasts the largest number of great wineries. The Pacific Northwest (Idaho included) is well-represented, too — but you’ll also find wineries from New York (both the Finger Lakes and Long Island), Virginia, Maryland, Texas, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut among our top 101.

Among our “bests” are old-line producers that helped pioneer the mid-twentieth-century California wine revolution (Heitz Cellar, No. 6; Mount Eden Vineyards, No. 48); new small producers of great promise (Evening Land Vineyards, No. 39; Andis Wines, No. 72); top Pacific Northwestern standard-setters (Quilceda Creek, No. 5; The Eyrie Vineyards, No. 70); the best of New York State and Virginia (Red Newt Cellars, No. 42; Michael Shaps Wineworks, No. 66); and, certainly, some wineries you might not have heard of, from places that might not immediately come to mind as wine producers (New Mexico’s Gruet, No. 62; Colorado’s Allis Ranch Winery, No. 92).

Those who compare this year’s ranking with last year’s might notice that some 17 of our 2015 “bests” are no longer represented. That doesn’t indicate any slippage of quality on their part; many of them received votes again this year, but the numbers just computed a little differently this time around, leaving room for some new entries. The same is true of producers who fell down the list; this doesn’t mean that their wines are not as good as they were last year, only that a slightly different panel cast their votes in a slightly different way.

#4 Calera Wine, Hollister, Calif.

Think you know California pinot noir? Think again. The only winery located in the Mount Harlan AVA on California’s Central Coast, Calera was one of the first modern-day wineries to plant pinot noir in the state, after winemaker Josh Jensen found a high-elevation, cool-climate location with soil rich in limestone. His pinots show Burgundian influences, balancing richness and elegance. Robert Parker, the most influential of wine critics, called Calera one of the most “compelling” pinot noir specialists “of not only the New World, but of Planet Earth.” With Chalone veteran Mike Waller as winemaker, Calera has also produced chardonnay, viognier, and aligoté at their 100-percent gravity-flow winery, and these are hardly to be ignored. John Tilson of *The Underground Wine Letter* salutes the winery’s “consistently superb wines over its entire history and strong advocacy of traditional winemaking.” The wines, he adds, “show great character and age beautifully.”