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Why Sonoma County deserves the wine spotlight

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In the fame game, Sonoma County doesn't match the megawatt radiance of its neighbour, Napa Valley. That's always seemed patently unfair to me because Sonoma is bigger, makes equally good wines and is arguably more scenic. Most wine tourists I know who are familiar with both regions prefer Sonoma's rolling hills and rubber-boot aesthetic to Napa's faux château architecture and ruler-straight central highway.

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I suspect wine style, rather than quality, has much to do with it. North American consumers have long been smitten with the mouth-filling opulence and steak-friendly flavours of cabernet sauvignon, Napa's signature red. Sonoma is better known for pinot noir and zinfandel, grapes with much smaller, if no less ardent, followings.



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Yet Sonoma cabernets – yes, there's cabernet in them thar hills, too – can be just as compelling. They also tend to cost less than comparable offerings from Napa. In a special Sonoma spotlight featured today at Ontario Vintages stores, three cabernets ranked among my favourite reds. The selections, which also include a couple of chardonnays and a zinfandel, are by no means the best of what you'll find on a tasting tour should you travel there. The chardonnays in particular are only so-so, hardly approaching the elegance and complexity of such recherché labels as Flowers, Kistler, Lioco and Littorai. Still, a few fine new Sonoma selections are better than none at all.

Kenwood Jack London Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon 2007 (California)

SCORE: 92 PRICE: $34.95

This full-bodied red embodies a style some might find surprising for California cabernet. The tannins are more angular and astringent than is often the case, more Bordeaux than New World. But it's packed with sun-ripened fruit and a rich essence of dark chocolate (think bitter, 95-per-cent cacao). The price is $34.99 in British Columbia.

Quivira Zinfandel 2008 (California)

SCORE: 91 PRICE: $26.95

Flavours of jammy berry and dark chocolate (think 70-per-cent cacao in this case) are impressively balanced by dry, fine-grained tannins, a dusting of lively baking spices and nip of acidity. It would pair well with rich stews or barbecued ribs.

Stonestreet Alexander Mountain Cabernet Sauvignon 2006 (California)

SCORE: 91 PRICE: $39.95

Stonestreet has the ring of a contrived winery name designed to conjure rural imagery. But it's the founder's middle name, as in Jess Stonestreet Jackson. The wealthy land-use lawyer and prominent thoroughbred-horse



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breeder, who died in April at age 81, played a role in popularizing chardonnay in America with the country's most popular bottling, Kendall-Jackson Vintner's Reserve. This is a newer, super-premium label. I love the aggressive tannins in this full-bodied yet austere red. It shows cassis, black tea and mineral nuances along with a firm slap of acidity. Try it with steak or age it for up to 15 years.

Frei Brothers Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon 2008 (California)

SCORE: 89 PRICE: $23.95

Part of the expansive Gallo family stable, this full-bodied red is crafted in a more open, accessible style than other reds here. Plum, prune and a hint of maraschino cherry combine with smooth oak. Drink it now with lamb or duck or cellar it for five to 10 years.

Freestone Chardonnay 2008 (California)

SCORE: 89 PRICE: $69.96

It hails from the cool Sonoma Coast appellation, so it's not as opulent as California's warmer-climate chardonnays, but it shows a good core of tropical fruit and apple butter. A minor quibble: The oak seems a bit pronounced, but I may be more sensitive to heavy oak than many consumers. It's a good lobster white.

Crossbarn Chardonnay 2008 (California)

SCORE: 89 PRICE: $21.95

I like the crisp acidity in this full-bodied white from the home label of esteemed international consultant Paul Hobbs, formerly with top California estates Opus One and Simi. There are pleasant layers of subtle stone- and tropical-fruit flavours in the bottle, but it may be slightly astringent for most palates. I'd prefer more fruity opulence to support the oak, but it's good nonetheless and it would match well with roast chicken.

De Loach Cabernet Sauvignon 2009 (California)

SCORE: 87 PRICE: $14.90

This is a smooth, easy-drinking red, full-bodied and soft, with an uncanny note of maraschino cherry, lifted on the finish by a light dusting of tannins and crisp acidity. It's widely available in Ontario and sells for $15.50 in Quebec.

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