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Celebrate the season

IN BLIND TASTE TESTS of 21 cabernet sauvignons and 19 sauvignon blancs, our experts found a total of 19 wines that are very good or better. (The others tested have off-notes or are a little less bal-

anced, complex, or intense.) More good news: About half cost \$15 or less. Prices are per 750-milliliter bottle. The Ratings describe each of the best, and "Talk the Talk" decipherers common winespeak.

▣ Cabernet sauvignon

This "king of red wines," the offspring of cabernet franc and sauvignon blanc vines, should be medium- to full-bodied, with a high tannin content that supports rich fruit—plum, cherry, raspberry, blackberry, and black currant—as well as vanilla, and sometimes tobacco, leather, vegetables, herbs, or oak. (Cabernets often require longer wood aging than do other reds.) Bear in mind that those are quick hits of aroma, not how the wine tastes overall. As you sip, cabernet may have a full yet soft mouth feel. Classic cabernets are often called the "iron fist in the velvet glove."

The finish should be medium to long, with no significant bitterness.

What we found. Most of the recommended cabernets are medium-bodied with black-fruit notes and hints of wood. They're dry, with a medium-length finish. These wines can be drunk now and may improve in the next two to three years.

What foods? Cabernet sauvignon goes well with red meats including game, stews or casseroles, hearty pastas, and strong-flavored cheese—in other words, nothing delicate. Protein can help soften astringent tannins; fat protects your palate against a too-assertive wine. Note to holiday chefs: Stuffing and gravy are chock-full of ingredients such as currants, mushrooms, and herbs including rosemary and sage, all of which can help link the food to the wine.

Bottom line. Louis M. Martini Napa and Raymond Reserve are excellent, with black and red fruit and hints of herbs, spice, and vanilla. Louis M. Martini has a bit of black currant and leather that Raymond doesn't have; Raymond has cherry and plum that Louis M. Martini doesn't have. Louis M. Martini would taste especially good with honey-baked ham (see page 7); Raymond, with duck and plum sauce, braised short ribs, or roasted potatoes.

Crios and 14 Hands taste very good and are CR Best Buys. Both have hints of cherry and black currant. Crios would pair well with barbecued ribs; 14 Hands, with roast chicken.

▣ TALK THE TALK

Structure. A combination of alcohol, sweetness, acid, and tannins—the wine's basic taste components—that creates an almost three-dimensional sensation in your mouth.

Tannin. A compound from the skin, seeds, and stems of grapes, and from oak barrels, lending a drying astringency.



Ratings Cabernet sauvignon

Recommended only In taste order.

CR Best Buy Recommended

Product*	Price	Comments
EXCELLENT		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Louis M. Martini Napa	\$25	Intense black and red fruit balanced by acidity/tannin. Complex, with spicy and cherry notes. Longer finish than most.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Raymond Reserve	29	Rich, full flavored. Intense black fruit balanced with wood notes. Longer finish than most. Slight bitterness.
VERY GOOD		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Beringer Knights Valley	23	Herbal and black-fruit notes, with a touch of wood. Slight bitterness.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Crios	13	Dried herbs and black cherries evident at first, with more ripe black fruit later. Balance of fruit and acid, trace of bitterness.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Educated Guess	20	Strong tannins balanced by acidity and red and black fruit. Longer finish than most, slight "heat" from alcohol.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 14 Hands	11	Soft wood and leather balance an array of black fruit.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Chateau Ste. Michelle Columbia Valley	15	Tasty black-fruit flavors and strong, food-friendly acidity.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Buehler	20	Spicy, with lots of tasty black fruit to balance the acidity and tannins.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Milbrandt Traditions	15	Ample wood and vanilla flavors balanced by concentrated black fruit.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Robert Mondavi Napa	23	Nice herbaceous cabernet flavors. Less intense than most.

*All are 2010 vintage except Crios, is 2011. All are from California except Crios (Argentina) and 14 Hands, Chateau Ste. Michelle, and Milbrandt (Washington). **Others tested:** Alamos, Catena, Charles Shaw (Trader Joe's), Columbia Crest Grand Estates, Columbia Crest H3, Faust, Lapostolle Casa, Los Vascos Grand Reserve, Red Knot McLaren Vale, Trackers Crossing 365 (Whole Foods), and Wine Cube (Target).

Lean. Describes a wine in which structure is more prominent than flavor, and fruit plays second fiddle. In white wine, there may be a slight mineral taste.

Nose. What you smell.

Palate. What you taste. The palate should confirm the nose.

Dry. The opposite of sweet. Little or no sugar is left over after winemaking.

Stylized. Having characteristics derived from winemaking techniques themselves (resulting in light woody or buttery tastes in a chardonnay, for instance).

Finish. How long taste stays after you swallow.