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Cool Victory for Cabernet

The 2010 wines from California are dense, balanced, and ideal for the cellar

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For the second year running, California vintners harvested their Cabernet crop after a trying, drawn-out and notably cool growing season. But much like the striking 2009s, the top 2010s are a remarkable collection of dense, deftly balanced wines, both rich in flavor and firm in structure. They are the kind of wines that should reward cellaring for 15 to 20 years, and they demonstrate why Cabernet holds such powerful allure for many wine lovers.

While vintners acknowledged the challenges of 2010, it turned out far better than anyone imagined, making it the best vintage yet of the 21st century, if ever so slightly. I rate the Napa's 2010 vintage at 98 points on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale, extending a hit parade of outstanding harvests that began with 2004, including five years that rate a classic 95 points or higher. There's never been a better time to be a lover of California Cabernet Sauvignon, a category undeniably powered by the performance of Napa Valley wines. Don't let the higher prices for some wines scare you off. There are scores of excellent wines in the \$60-and-below range.

Since last year's report ("[Napa Cabernet Triumphs Again](#)," Nov. 15, 2012), we've tasted more Cabernets in our Napa office than in any previous year—nearly 900, including more than 500 wines from 2010 and more than 200 from 2009, as well as nearly 80 2003s in a blind retrospective of that now decade-old vintage. (For more on the 2003s, see page 35; an [alphabetical guide](#) to all wines tasted for this report begins on page 127). Consumers would do well to focus on 2010 and 2009; early returns suggest 2011 will be far spottier, as it was the coolest and wettest vintage in decades.

The success of the 2010s makes a strong case for cooler years that avoid excessive heat or heat spikes. But they can be nerve-racking if fall rain arrives at the wrong time and, notably, 2010 had its harrowing instances. Indeed, based on early reports from vintners last year, and my own tastings, I preliminarily rated 2010 on the cusp of outstanding. Since then, however, the greater strength of the vintage has become obvious, and the year clearly merits an upgrade to a classic rating.

"2010 essentially mirrored 2009 but [harvest] shifted two weeks later," says Kirk Venge of Venge Vineyards in Napa Valley, whose 2010 Napa Valley Reserve earned 92 points (\$135). The lengthy season left growers and vintners edgy. Grapes ripened slowly and presented challenges at several intervals. Making the right moves at the right times in the vineyard was vital, but many vintners were prepared, having faced similarly dicey weather in 2009.

Preemptive strikes by growers included adjusting to a late veraison (when grapes begin to color) by removing foliage and leaving the grapes more exposed to the sun. They also did more thinning to remove clusters that were less ripe and less likely to ripen along with the core of the vineyard's grapes. "Looking back now, I'd have to say that 2010 turned out to be one of those vintages where you had to know when to play offense and when to play defense," says Elias Fernandez, who makes Shafer Hillside Select, routinely one of California's best wines (the 2010 will be released later this year).



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The list of highly rated Napa Valley wines from the 2010 vintage is dominated by perennial top-tier Cabernet producers and is centered around the mid-valley appellations of Oakville and Rutherford. Oakville's Beckstoffer To Kalon vineyard in particular was the source of many outstanding wines.

At the top of the list in 2010 is Schrader Cellars Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard MMX (97, \$400/1.5L), also known as "Old Sparky" and made only in magnum. Nine wines earned 96-point ratings, including three more from Schrader—its Beckstoffer To Kalon (\$175), Schrader Beckstoffer To Kalon RBS (\$175) and Beckstoffer To Kalon T6 (\$175)—as well as Caymus Special Selection (\$130), Harlan Estate (\$800), Hewitt Rutherford Double Plus (\$150), Lewis Hillstone Vineyard (\$130), Lewis Reserve (\$135) and Screaming Eagle (\$850), the valley's most expensive wine. Schrader's Cabernets are among the most opulent and expressive, while Hewitt Double Plus has a tighter framework. The Lewis Cabernets are more in line with Schrader's. Caymus Special Selection draws on grapes from vineyards throughout the valley, and this latest ranks among the best in a long line of exceptional bottlings dating to the late 1970s.

Among those hitting the 95-point mark were Bryant Family Vineyard (\$425), Corra (\$135), a pair from Pott—The Arsenal Greer Vineyard (\$120) and Stags Leap District Actaeon Quixote Vineyard (\$110)—Hewitt Rutherford (\$92), Tor Beckstoffer To Kalon Clone 337 (\$350; magnum only) and newcomer Tusk (\$370), a blend of valley and hillside grapes. The vintage was also an impressive year for Sonoma Cabernet; highlights from the region include the Skipstone Oliver's Blend Alexander Valley (94, \$110), Rodney Strong Alexander Valley Rockaway Single Vineyard (94, \$75), Kinsella Dry Creek Valley Tamara Vineyard (93, \$100) and Sojourn Sonoma Valley Home Ranch Vineyard (93, \$48).

The ranks of producers continue to grow, reflecting vintners' passion for California's signature red and a growing market for the wines (see "The New & The Noteworthy," for profiles of some up-and-coming projects). Kelly Fleming, co-founder of the Fleming's steakhouse chain, has a namesake Napa label with Celia Welch as winemaker; the 2010 is sleek and refined (93, \$110). Mt. Brave, the former Chateau Potelle property on Mount Veeder, is new from Jackson Family Wines; Chris Carpenter is the winemaker. The 2010 (92, \$75) is a cellar-worthy effort, tight and firm.

Napa Cabernet in particular has been a lure for a number of former and current sports stars, including baseball great Tom Seaver of GTS (2010: 94, \$110), the subject of this issue's cover story. In addition to Seaver, there is 7-foot-6-inch former NBA star Yao Ming; his Napa Valley Family Reserve (89, \$625) is reminiscent of a classified-growth Bordeaux and priced that way, too, although his Yao Ming 2010 (88, \$150) and Napa Crest 2010 (88, \$48) may be had for considerably less. Oakland Raiders defensive back Charles Woodson, owner of TwentyFour, marks his fourth vintage with his 2009 Cabernet (90, \$112).

Despite the high prices for most of the top-rated 2010s, there are some relative bargains. For example, for the second year in a row, Beringer's Knights Valley Reserve earned a 94-point rating; at \$60, the 2010 is more expensive than the 2009, but is still an exceptional buy. So is a new Beringer red called Quantum (92, \$60), a Bordeaux blend anchored by Cabernet. B Cellars Blend 24, from Napa Valley (92, \$51), is another well-priced option, as is Charles Krug Generations Family Reserve (92, \$50), which shows how quickly this historic Napa winery upgraded its line of reds by letting the grapes ripen more fully and allowing the alcohol level to rise. At \$50 each, the Round Pond Estate Rutherford 2010 (91) and Hall Napa Valley 2010 (90) are solid buys.

Despite their differing growing conditions, the 2010s share the intensity, focus, density and layers of flavors found in the top 2009s. In both years, the tannins are ripe and firm. In many cases, the 2010s taste like the ripeness level has been dialed back a degree or two compared with vintages such as 2007, in which the ripest wines achieved a berry pie quality.

The 2010s are nonetheless quite showy and attractive. They are charming to drink already, while their exquisite balance and finesse bodes well for aging. There are also many Cabernets from cooler regions that are less open, and those will benefit from at least a year or two of cellaring. While most California Cabernets are approachable on release, they typically reach a peak-drinking plateau around age six, then retain their fruit purity for another six or more years.

"Everyone knows it was a challenging year in the vineyard due to the coolness," says Thomas Brown, who makes Cabernet under his own Rivers-Marie label as well as for Schrader, Casa Piena, GTS and Kinsella. "What saved us, though, was how cool it was early on. From the very beginning of the vineyard cycle, we knew aggressive thinning would be necessary to push vineyards along as fast as possible. We traditionally don't do much pre-veraison thinning, for fear the remaining berries will increase in size, but in '10 we didn't feel that was an option. In most sites, we put half the fruit on the ground before we even saw the first hint of color in the grapes."

Even with this strategy, vintners say a few spots around the valley didn't ripen fully, mostly in the hills and areas where afternoon sunshine isn't abundant. "The floor didn't have much of an issue ripening if you thinned hard," Brown adds. "There's a perception out there that the wines are lighter in style than in years past, but I don't think that is exactly accurate. It's a higher-acid vintage, so the wines have a lighter-on-their-feet feel, which is refreshing now but will diminish over time as they age and fatten. No doubt [2010 is] less consistent than other good vintages, but I'd chalk most of that up to operator error rather than vintage conditions. If you were a quality-first Cabernet producer, you could adjust for all the year's weirdness."

Some vintners will remember 2010 as having no summer. "It was the coldest vintage since 1989," recalls Genevieve Janssens, winemaker at Robert Mondavi Winery in Oakville. "There was no real flow. We would start and stop. We had the feeling that we were always in first gear and never could shift into second or third gear."

The small crop helped, though. "I doubt we could have achieved such uniform ripeness in a cool year with a

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large crop on the vines," says Celia Welch, owner of Corra Wines and also winemaker for Scarecrow, Lindstrom, Barbour and Kelly Fleming. A late-August heat wave damaged some grapes, but also propelled berries to ripeness, a sort of yin-yang. Welch says July's cool weather set the stage for success, allowing grapes to ripen and develop deeper color.

Three harvest season decisions were key for Opus One winemaker Michael Silacci. "The first was to respect the balance between fruit and leaves by thinning only clusters that would be dropped in an average year. The second decision was to refrain from plucking leaves in early August. Though this would have facilitated air flow and exposure to the sun, protecting the vines to a greater extent against powdery mildew and botrytis bunch rot, it would have put the fruit perilously at risk in the event of a heat wave."

Two heat waves did hit near the end of August, with temperatures peaking at 107° F in Oakville, where Opus One is located. The third decision, Silacci says, was to shift the ripeness paradigm: "Ripeness was redefined in 2010. We leaned toward capturing fresh fruit as opposed to ripe fruit flavors at the onset of harvest."

Nicolas Morlet of Peter Michael Winery reports that severe heat in August destroyed the entire crop from the producer's new vineyard acquisition in Napa Valley, the former Showket Vineyard in Oakville. But he describes 2010 as being excellent for Peter Michael's Les Pavots Cabernet blend, grown in the mountains of Knights Valley in Sonoma. Elsewhere in Napa, the heat spikes helped vineyards lagging in ripeness catch up.

"This heat helped push vineyards ahead of the rains that began in the first two weeks of October," says Mike Smith, of Myriad Cellars and Carter Cellars.

"For most, there was a sprint to the finish—trying to beat the rains," Smith adds. "Unlike 2009 and 2011, most vineyards in 2010 [had been harvested] before the first big rain event. Winemakers and vineyard managers earned their keep with the 2010 vintage, and coordination to get it all done at the end was crucial. Carter Cellars picked its last To Kalon Block hours before the first rain settled in."

While you should focus on 2010, don't ignore 2009—because Cabernet vintages overlap, the younger vintage often gets more attention than still-available and late-release wines from the preceding year. The market still offers scores of outstanding 2009s, led by two from Napa—Paul Hobbs Oakville Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard (95, \$275) and Raymond Generations Napa Valley (95, \$100), perhaps the best Raymond ever made. By securing wines from either vintage you'll be drinking well over the next decade or so, and in some instances much longer. It will be fascinating to watch how these wines develop in the years ahead.

Senior editor James Laube is Wine Spectator's lead taster on California Cabernet.

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