



# CALIFORNIA DREAMIN': PERFECTING EVERY WINE LOVER'S WISH LIST

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America is, as stated, the United States of America. These states may be united but, as we all know, each state is very different from the other. One state that makes a big difference to the whole of the USA, politically, economically and culturally, is California. The political hub of the USA may be Washington DC, New York the economic hub and many other states lay claim to being centres of culture, but California stakes its claim as the country's major wine state. There may be other states growing wine, such as Oregon and Washington, but California is the daddy of the wine states.

Winemaking began in California in the late 1860s and thrived until two major events occurred. Firstly, there was phylloxera, then from 1919 to 1933 there was Prohibition. Prohibition practically wiped out all but a few wineries. The survivors were making wine for the Church. Following this period, there were two main pioneers of winemaking in California. First there was Ernest and Julio Gallo, who started their business in 1933, directly after Prohibition. There was plenty of competition, but they concentrated their efforts on commercial winemaking from pre-prohibition pamphlets found in the basement of the Modesto public library. This became the essence of their initial success. E & J Gallo is now the largest wine company in the USA.

A decade after the Gallo brothers began, Robert Mondavi joined the family business in 1943. The Mondavi family had shortly before bought the Charles Krug winery. Robert eventually started his own winery with his sons in 1966. Michael, the eldest son, was in charge of sales and Tim of the winemaking. This was the first major winery built in the Napa Valley after Prohibition.

In the following years the wines from California were drunk nearly exclusively in the US. Then in 1976 came the "Judgement of Paris", a blind tasting competition, organised by the UK's Steven Spurrier, that pitched Californian wines against the best wines from France. California won the day and from then on Californian wines were truly on the map and in demand as wines of the highest quality.



There has been much French investment in Napa, including the acquisition of Raymond Vineyards by the Boisset Family Estates. Run by Jean Charles Boisset, who is now married to Gina Gallo, granddaughter of Julio Gallo, he has strong ideas on the experience wine should bring. Even the winery visits are an experience, with stuffed lions and mannequins dressed in lingerie hanging from the ceiling. Coloured lights illuminate the vats and red velvet coats the walls of the tasting rooms. There are model hands protruding from walls holding scent bottles with the aromas the wines produce. It's a far cry from the experience outside the winery, which is all about the cohesion of land and plant. There is a complete use of biodynamic practices at the vineyard, which is thoughtfully laid out in a garden explaining the processes and philosophy behind biodynamic viticulture and winemaking.

Today there are more than 500 wineries in the Napa Valley and many more in the surrounding American Viticultural Areas, or AVAs, the closest to Napa being Sonoma. Napa is known for its big cabernets and big oaky chardonnays, but this has clearly been changing over the past decade. The wines are neither shy nor retiring in style, yet have a lot more finesse and elegance than 10 or 20 years ago. Back in the 1990s the winemakers of the Napa Valley had a tendency to chase high scores from the wine critic Robert Parker, whose recommendations were influential in the pricing of top Californian wines. These wines were overly concentrated and perhaps a little forced. Since then, the winemakers have been trying to make wines in a style more in tune with the hot days and cold nights of the Napa Valley. They are concentrated but without being over extracted and are more led by the fruit. In the case of the white wines, less new oak has been used, allowing the fruit in the wine to shine through.