



# AND THE VERDICT IS...



They sipped, they spit, they argued. More than 50 judges winnowed nearly 3,000 wines down to the very best. The result: a list you can count on.

By Sara Schneider

**TRY AS I MIGHT,** I'm incapable of convincing anyone that my job as *Sunset* wine editor (ergo, professional wine taster) is tough. What could be hard about having to sip a little wine most days? I give you the 48 hours of our *Sunset* International Wine Competition—this year, April 28 and 29—as proof that the *job* of tasting, of judging, can be beyond grueling.

With close to 3,000 wines entered this year, we gathered more than 50 judges—all among the West's most respected palates. Working in panels of three, each judge tackled about 100 wines a day (a new glass every 3 minutes or so), tasting for varietal character, soundness, and complexity. To keep their focus and give each wine its fair shake, those judges needed a great deal of protein for breakfast, vast quantities of roast beef to cleanse their palates between flights of tannic red wine (tasted in the morning when palates were fresher; white and sparkling in the afternoon), and coffee on cue at 3 p.m. Spitting was a given, for pure survival.

Through flight after flight, the panels discussed each wine—winemakers sharing opinions about quality, sommeliers reacting to style... Disagreements (as in all professional wine competitions) were common. But as the experts shared details and conclusions, truth came out about every wine. (A scribe assigned to each panel kept careful notes.)

When the process is airtight (see logistics at left) and the judges are truly experienced tasters, the results of a competition like ours mean something. A *Sunset* medal is an endorsement to be trusted (go to [sunset.com/2014medals](http://sunset.com/2014medals) for our whole list for 2014). And from the judges' scores emerge exciting trends, groups of wines that are at the top of their game, and special values among thousands of bottles on shop shelves now. Here are some especially compelling discoveries among this year's Gold Medal winners.



Photographs by GABRIELA HASBUN



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**“This tasting order—Pinot, Merlot, Cab, then Pinot Grigio—is a great plan. Sip a little white after red, and you avoid purple teeth and wine fatigue.”**

—LESLIE SBROCCO, AUTHOR, *WINE FOR WOMEN*; KQED HOST, *CHECK, PLEASE!*

BACK IN THE GROOVE

## PINOT NOIR REBOUNDS



Remember how the movie *Sideways* put Pinot on the map 10 years ago? Mediocre versions flooded the market to satisfy demand. Now, it seems we're recovering. This year's class of Pinots won a higher percentage of Gold Medals than any other category.

Acacia 2012 Pinot Noir (Carneros; \$28)  
Black Stallion 2012 Pinot Noir (Los Carneros; \$28)

**DeLoach** 2012 Pinot Noir (Russian River Valley; \$24)

Dutton-Goldfield 2012 Dutton Ranch, Emerald Ridge Vineyard Pinot Noir (Green Valley of Russian River Valley; \$58)

Francis Ford Coppola 2012 Director's Cut Pinot Noir (Russian River Valley, Sonoma County; \$27)

Huge Bear 2012 Pinot Noir (Russian River Valley; \$45)

MacMurray Ranch 2012 Pinot Noir (Santa Lucia Highlands; \$35)

Patz & Hall 2012 Pinot Noir (Sonoma Coast; \$46)

Roblar 2012 Gold Collection Pinot Noir (Sta. Rita Hills; \$50)

Schug 2012 Pinot Noir (Carneros; \$30)

Sonoma-Cutrer 2012 Pinot Noir (Russian River Valley, Sonoma County; \$34)

Sonoma Hills 2012 Pinot Noir (Russian River Valley; \$23)

Stemmler 2012 Estate Vineyard Pinot Noir (Carneros; \$44)

Stephen Ross 2012 Pinot Noir (Santa Lucia Highlands; \$25)

Taft Street 2012 Pinot Noir (Russian River Valley; \$24)

Talley 2012 Pinot Noir (Arroyo Grande Valley; \$36)

# TOP REDS OVER \$40

We all know that some whopping wine prices are based on reputation and scarcity. In a tasting like ours—blind to price—the true cream rises to the top. These reds are pricey but worth it.

Aratas 2010 Petite Sirah (Napa Valley; \$45)  
Betz Family 2011 “Besoleil” (Columbia Valley; \$45)

Dry Creek Vineyard 2011 “The Mariner” Meritage (Dry Creek Valley; \$45)

Gamache 2010 Vineyard Select Cabernet Sauvignon (Columbia Valley; \$55)

Halter Ranch 2011 Estate Reserve “Ancestor” (Paso Robles; \$50)

Hendry 2009 Hendry Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley; \$55)

Huge Bear 2010 “Ursa Gigantes” (Sonoma County; \$45)

Meadowlark 2007 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon (Santa Barbara County; \$50)

Mi Sueño 2010 Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley; \$70)

Obsidian Ridge 2010 Obsidian Ridge Vineyard “Half Mile” (Red Hills, Lake County; \$60)

Palmeri 2011 “High Elevation” Van Ness Vineyard Syrah (Alexander Valley; \$42)

Robert Mondavi 2010 Oakville Cabernet Sauvignon (Oakville, Napa Valley; \$55)

Silverado Vineyards 2010 Estate Grown Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley; \$58)

St. Francis 2011 “Rockpile Red” (Sonoma County; \$50)

Willamette Valley Vineyards 2012 Bernau Black Pinot Noir (Willamette Valley; \$55)

William Hill 2011 Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley; \$40)





RESPECTABLE AGAIN

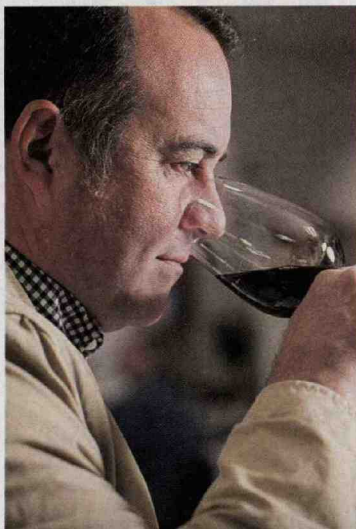
## A NEW DAY FOR CHARDONNAY

These Gold Medal bottles range in style but impressed our judges with their balance. (Looks like Chard might be growing out of its awkward excessive-butter-and-oak phase.)



**"I love combing through the results after the fact, to see if I really did like something I've always considered a standard-bearer—like King Estate Pinot Gris."**

—TIM TEICHGRAEBER,  
WINE AND SPIRITS WRITER



- |                                                                          |                                                                          |                                                                      |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Black Stallion 2012 Limited Release Chardonnay (Napa Valley; \$32)       | (Russian River Valley; \$30)                                             | Rodney Strong 2012 Chardonnay (Sonoma County; \$17)                  |
| Clos Du Val 2012 Chardonnay (Carneros; \$28)                             | Kimmel 2012 Chardonnay (Mendocino County; \$32)                          | Scott Family 2012 Dijon Clone Chardonnay (Arroyo Seco; \$25)         |
| Franciscan 2012 "Cuvée Sauvage" Chardonnay (Carneros, Napa County; \$40) | Last Canyon 2012 Ruxton Vineyard Chardonnay (Russian River Valley; \$35) | Stag's Leap Wine Cellars 2012 "Karia" Chardonnay (Napa Valley; \$35) |
| Fritz 2012 Chardonnay (Russian River Valley; \$25)                       | Miner 2012 Chardonnay (Napa Valley; \$30)                                | ZD 2012 Chardonnay (California; \$37)                                |
| Jordan 2012 Chardonnay                                                   | Red Car 2012 Chardonnay (Sonoma Coast; \$35)                             |                                                                      |

## BEST BUYS



Our judges tasted \$15 wines alongside \$50 wines, without knowing which was which, and these wallet-friendly bottles held up. Better than most weeknight wines, they'll do you proud for any occasion.

- |                                                                                    |                                                                                                        |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Alamos 2013 Cabernet Sauvignon (Mendoza, Argentina; \$13)                          | Lock & Key 2011 Meritage (North Coast; \$12)                                                           |
| Buena Vista 2013 Vinicultural Society Cabernet Sauvignon (Sonoma; \$15)            | Louis Jadot 2012 (Beaujolais Villages AOC; \$13)                                                       |
| Casa Silva 2012 Cuvée Colchagua Carmenere (D.O. Valle de Colchagua, Chile; \$15)   | Lucinda & Millie 2012 Cabernet Sauvignon (Mendocino County; \$11)                                      |
| Clos du Bois 2012 Cabernet Sauvignon (North Coast; \$15)                           | Montes 2012 Classic Series Cabernet Sauvignon (D.O. Colchagua Valley, Chile; \$13)                     |
| Columbia Winery 2012 Cabernet Sauvignon (Columbia Valley; \$12)                    | Paul Mas Single Vineyard Collection 2013 Savignac Vineyard Carignan (Pays d'Hérault IGP, France; \$14) |
| Hahn 2012 Merlot (Central Coast; \$14)                                             | Prunotto 2012 Fiulet (Barbera d'Asti DOCG, Italy; \$15)                                                |
| Jones of Washington 2011 Estate Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon (Wahluke Slope; \$15) | Renwood 2011 Zinfandel (California; \$15)                                                              |
| Las Rocas de San Alejandro 2011 Garnacha (Catalayud DO, Spain; \$14)               | Sofos 2010 Agiorgitiko/Cabernet Sauvignon (PGI Corinth, Greece; \$12)                                  |
|                                                                                    | Sokol Blosser NV 3rd Edition "Evolution Red" (American; \$15)                                          |



BREAK OUT

## GREAT WHITES

This is the year to try stellar whites that aren't Chardonnay or Sauvignon Blanc.

- Adelaida 2012 "Version" (Paso Robles; \$50)
- Alexandria Nicole 2013 Destiny Ridge Vineyard Estate Grown "Shepherds Mark" (Horse Heaven Hills; \$24)
- Bokisch 2013 Clay Station Vineyard Verdejo (Borden Ranch, Lodi; \$18)
- Dunham 2012 Lewis Estate Vineyard Riesling (Columbia Valley; \$20)
- Halter Ranch 2013 "Côtes de Paso Blanc" (Paso Robles; \$28)
- King Estate Signature Collection 2013 Pinot Gris (Oregon; \$17)
- La Cana 2013 Albariño (Rias Baixas DO, Spain; \$17)
- Navarro 2012 "White Roan" (Mendocino; \$18)
- Palmina 2012 Honea Vineyard Arneis (Santa Ynez Valley; \$20)
- Troon 2013 "Foundation '72" Vermentino (Applegate Valley, Southern Oregon; \$18)
- Winter's Hill 2013 Pinot Blanc (Dundee Hills, Oregon; \$17)



**“As an Oregonian, I’m partial to Pinot, and these 2012s are great! (Even those from California.) But the Washington red blends are knockouts too.”**

—COLE DANEHOWER, PUBLISHER,  
 ESSENTIALNORTHWESTWINES.COM

## AFFORDABLE CABS



What we all need most are mid-range Cabernets that overdeliver for their price. Here are eight among hundreds tasted that hit that sweet spot.

**Barrister 2010**  
 Bacchus Vine-  
 yard Cabernet  
 Sauvignon  
 (Columbia Valley;  
 \$31)

**Katherine Gold-  
 schmidt 2012**  
 Crazy Creek  
 Cabernet Sauvi-  
 gnon (Alexander  
 Valley, Sonoma  
 County; \$20)

**Lapostolle 2012**  
 Apalta Vineyard  
 Cuvée Alexan-  
 dre Cabernet  
 Sauvignon (Col-  
 chagua Valley,  
 Chile; \$25)

**Mantra 2012**  
 Cabernet Sauvi-  
 gnon (Alexander

Valley, Sonoma  
 County; \$30)

**Napa Cellars**  
 2012 Cabernet  
 Sauvignon  
 (Napa Valley;  
 \$26)

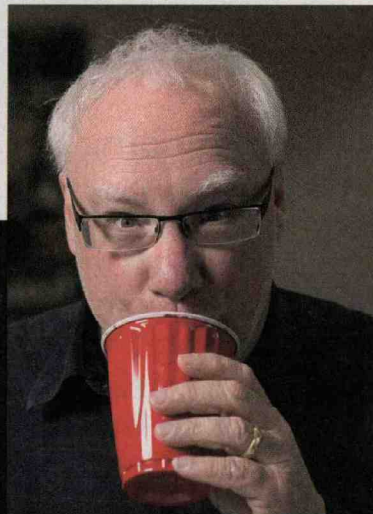
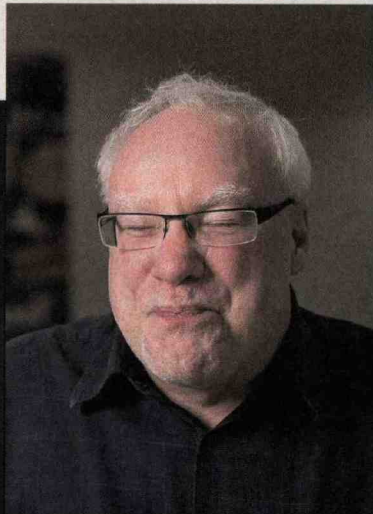
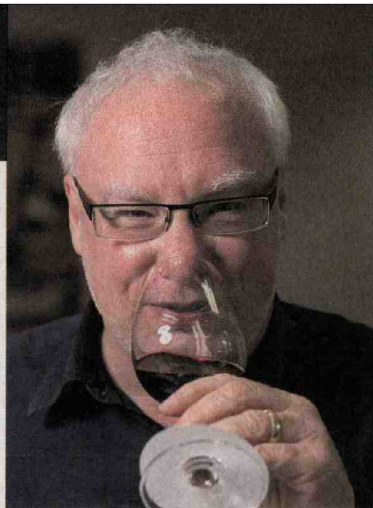
**Pearmund 2012**  
 Silver Creek  
 Vineyard Cab-  
 ernet Sauvignon  
 (Virginia; \$25)

**Trentadue 2012**  
 “La Storia” Cab-  
 ernet Sauvignon  
 (Alexander Val-  
 ley, Sonoma  
 County; \$35)

**Uppercut 2012**  
 Cabernet Sauvi-  
 gnon (Napa  
 Valley; \$25)



**Hear Sara!** Catch wine  
 editor Sara Schneider each  
 week on David Wilson’s  
 Grape Encounters:  
[grapeencountersradio.com](http://grapeencountersradio.com).



SARA’S TASTING TIPS

## DO IT LIKE A PRO

I don’t suggest taking on 100 wines in a day, but when it comes to tasting like the professionals (check out Cole Danehower’s style above), I can say: “Do try this at home.” What you uncover will punch up your pleasure.

**USE** a thin-rimmed glass with a bowl large enough to swirl the wine exuberantly without sloshing it over the top.

**TILT** the glass and twirl it slowly, looking at the wine’s color against a light back-  
 drop. The denser it is,

the more flavors and textures likely have been extracted from the skins. The viscosity of the rivulets (the “legs”) when you right the glass hints at alcohol level—thicker usually means higher.

**GIVE** the wine a good swirl and stick your

nose in the glass, tak-  
 ing a few short, sharp  
 sniffs. Register what  
 you smell: citrus,  
 flowers, stone fruit,  
 red or black fruit,  
 herbs, spices? Those  
 flavors should follow.

**TAKE** a sip and let it  
 roll over your tongue  
 for a good three or

four seconds. Do you  
 taste the same fla-  
 vors? Are they simple  
 or complex? Is the  
 wine tannic (a drying  
 effect), and are the  
 tannins rough or  
 smooth? Does the  
 taste of the wine last  
 long? Do you like it?

**SPIT** (optional).

WINE BOTTLE: JEFFERY CROSS