

## Napa Cabernet 2013

*by James Molesworth - January 2024 (from the Nov 2023 print issue)*

The majority of California's top Cabernet Sauvignons are often enjoyed in the first decade of their life. With their typically copious fruit married to structures that are more polished and fine-grained than their red Bordeaux cousins, these wines are understandably hard to resist in their early days.

But producers and experienced consumers know that the best of the Golden State's Cabernets, dominated by bottlings from Napa Valley, merit a decade of cellaring before consuming, at which point they shed their youthful exuberant fruit and begin to reveal more nuance, showcasing Napa's range of distinctive terroirs, from valley floor to mountainside. Earlier this year, I conducted my first retrospective tasting of an individual vintage of California Cabernet since I began covering the category five years ago. The timing couldn't be better, since it afforded me a look back at 2013, a vintage that garnered a classic rating of 97 points on its release.

I selected bottlings for the tasting based on a combination of factors, starting with Wine Spectator's initial reviews of the wines along with the winery's historical importance and overall track record for quality. Production levels were also considered, in the hopes that consumers might still be able to find some of these wines in the secondary market. Samples were provided directly from producers and tasted blind at our Napa office.

Of the 55 wines tasted, 24 earned classic ratings of 95 points or higher, while the remainder all earned at least 90 points. Leading the way is the Dominus Napa Valley 2013 (97 points), a towering example of Napa Cabernet that is really starting to roll now, with tiers of cassis, crushed blackberry and boysenberry preserves wrapped in enticing sweet bay leaf, tobacco and savory notes. The wine is just starting to open and should continue to evolve positively for another two decades.

Close behind is a group of eight wines that all earned 96 points, including the Abreu Cappella St. Helena 2013, Bond Vecina Napa Valley 2013, Dalla Valle Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2013, Harlan Estate Napa Valley 2013, Dunn Cabernet Sauvignon Howell Mountain 2013, Joseph Phelps Insignia Napa Valley 2013 and Ridge Monte Bello Santa Cruz Mountains 2013. Another 15 wines clock in at 95 points, rounding out the classic-scorers.

The hyperbole around young vintages can often seem similar in tone—power, richness, depth. It's with the benefit of time that vintages truly begin to unveil their defining characteristics. A handful separate themselves further with their historical importance, marking critical turning points in the evolution of a wine region. The 2013 vintage is one of those years for Napa Valley.

The '13 growing season saw recent climate change patterns suddenly bare their teeth, marking the end of a period of cooler, wetter years in Napa that lasted from 2010 through 2012. The experience gained in these years has continued to benefit vintners down the road. Luckily, some key lessons were learned ahead of 2013, in time to put them to use.

Drought also played an outsized role in the 2013 season. Though technically there was an average annual rainfall of 33 inches in the valley, the timing of the rain was key, with the majority falling in November and December of 2012. After that, the 2013 growing season was exceedingly dry. (Annual rainfall is calculated from October to the following September, not by the calendar year.)

“All the rain came in the fourth quarter of 2012. The calendar year of 2013 saw only about 6 to 8 inches. There was a classic 120 days bloom-to-harvest cycle and a yield of 3 tons per acre,” says [Dan Petroski](#), who joined Larkmead in 2006 as an intern and eventually oversaw its winemaking from 2012 through 2021.

With the majority of the water falling at the end of 2012, producers got their first taste of the new Napa Valley, where winter rains are absolutely critical to set up the vineyards for the inevitably warm and dry season that has since become the norm.

With time, many of the 2013s are now starting to show deep loam or cast iron accents, yet their aromas remain vibrant and fresh, ranging from floral to chaparral notes. This is a sign that heat wasn’t an issue, since excessive heat during the growing season can denude aromas. The wines have similarities in their depth and scale to other recent top-rated years, such as 2016 and 2018, but it’s the structure of the 2013s—almost old-school in feel, with strident, authoritative tannins—that really marks the vintage.

Though no one could have predicted it at the time, the period from 2013 through 2016 is now cemented as one of Napa’s greatest runs of Cabernet vintages. Although each of these years is distinct, it was the 2013 vintage that began the run and remains secure on its pedestal, keeping its 97-point rating. Only the 2016 and 2018 vintages rate higher over the past decade. “It was a real turning point for Napa Cabernet,” says Petroski. “It seems as if everything changed, from the weather to the farming to the wines.”



*The 2013 vintage was a turning point for many wineries, including Larkmead Vineyards.  
(Bob McClenahan)*

## Tasting 2013 California Cabernet Sauvignon

The 55 wines below were blind-tasted by senior editor James Molesworth earlier this year.

### LARKMEAD Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2013

**Score:** 93

**WS Review:** Reveals an enticing sweet mulberry note out front, backed by red and black currant, apple wood and licorice flavors that cruise through.