

There's More to Napa Valley Than Big, Bold Cabs

While outstanding vintages of Cabernet Sauvignon still command stratospheric prices, there's a renaissance happening with white wines, lesser-known grapes and accessible bottles.

By Elaine Chukan Brown

Another revolution is brewing in the Napa Valley. Naturally, the classic Cabernet that made the region famous still commands attention but there are more players in the game: bold, brawny mouthwatering red blends, a new crop of succulent white wines and lesser-known reds are proving that the region isn't resting on its laurels.

The Northern California enclave built its luxurious reputation through exclusive tasting experiences and cashmere-level fine dining. Blue chip collectors still race to buy cult Cabernets from Screaming Eagle, Harlan Estate, Bryant, Colgin and Shafer's Hillside Select, among them. But, with an insider view guiding the way, lesser-known yet sumptuous wines from heartracing whites to light-hearted reds can also be found.

A look to the history of Napa Valley helps point the way. Chenin Blanc and Sauvignon Blanc made some of the first great white wines of the region. They're even more exciting today. For reds, you can find a similar story. It's worth returning to Napa's first great varieties, Zinfandel and Petite Sirah, while also exploring some of the newer surprises. Ever heard of Crljenak Kaštelanski? Have you tasted a Tempranillo-Cabernet Sauvignon blend? You can find them in Napa—and they're impressive.

In the region, it's possible to satisfy a more diverse palate and range of price points than you may believe.

So, what to drink now? There's something from Napa for every type of drinker and every type of mood. A willingness to explore guides the palate. Look to wines new to your radar when you're ready for excitement and surprise. Return to the classics when it's time to bring comfort and familiarity to a dynamic day. Ageworthy reds for cellaring, affordable and refreshing weeknight white wines and bottles that speak to the region's history. We've mapped out our favorite selections below.

Bold Reds

When it's time to savor rich flavor with velvety texture, look to Napa's talent for generous red blends. The variety of soils and predominance of summer sun bring succulence to tannins and a generosity of flavor. Ripening red wine in a region that stays dry in the summer with bright sunny days and cooler nights is unique in the world of wine. It means Napa provides the benchmark for combining intensity of flavor with palate cleansing tannins, lengthening acidity and a thoughtfulness that makes each taste of the wine magnetic.

These reds are built to deliver both enticement and satisfaction.

Larkmead Vineyards 2021 Firebelle Red Blend, 92 points

This attractive and sophisticated wine relies on a hearty portion of Merlot combined with the structure of Cabernet Sauvignon and aromatics of Cabernet Franc. Tobacco, toasted oak and roast coffee aromatics are greeted by flavors of black plum, sweet tobacco and dark chocolate, with a refreshing lift of fennel. Creamy, palate-coating tannins carry into a long finish for brooding and intriguing effect.

