

DOWN CELLAR BY JIM BRYANT

Hail a Cab!

For most wine experts, Cabernet Sauvignon represents the Holy Grail of wines. During most of the past three centuries, it most assuredly represented the apex of most connoisseurs' wine game. In large part, this was and still is due to the long history of success growing Cabernet Sauvignon in the Bordeaux region of France. However, Cabernet Sauvignon is relatively easy to grow and accordingly is now available from many parts of the world.

The grape is small and intensely blue/black in color, with the resulting high ratio of skin to juice providing relatively high tannins. This high tannin level is a key reason that Cabernet Sauvignon has the longest aging potential of all wines. In addition, the general long history of its planting has produced very old vines in many parts of the world, which contributes to its structure, density, and age ability. As the vines age, the roots go

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deeper into the soil, accessing more minerals and earthy characteristics; older vines also experience a decrease in yield per vine, which results in more intense flavors. These flavors may include blackberry, blueberry, raspberry, cassis, mint, herbal, pepper, vegetable, briar, cedar, chocolate, espresso, pepper, plums, licorice, spices, currants, olives, graphite, and other minerals.

In addition, over the past quarter-century, winemakers have started dropping fruit during the growing season (green harvest) to reduce the yields, which universally improves the quality of the wine. As a result of all the aforementioned, the prices of the most famous have soared.

Thankfully, there are alternatives to buying Bordeaux. Cabernet Sauvignon has a long history in the United States and has enjoyed increasing worldwide favor over the past two to three decades. In fact, most of the northern hemisphere (Old World) Cabernet Sauvignon owes its existence to U.S. rootstock, which was grafted to vines in Europe that had been attacked by the lout *phylloxera*, causing the vines to die.

After a lengthy startup over the last half of the nineteenth century, U.S. wines improved, and by the end of the century, they captured several championships against international competition. The industry's progress was severely impacted by Prohibition from 1920–33 and essentially started up again upon the act's repeal. Although some great wines were made in the third, fourth, and fifth decades, mainly by Beaulieu Vineyards and Inglenook, California's renaissance began with the Robert Mondavi winery's debut in 1966.

U.S. wine got its biggest jump-start in 1976 at the Judgment of Paris, where two American wines bested their famous French competitors in a blind tasting judged by the French. Ever since, California wine has soared in popularity and is now the home of many famous as well as relatively unknown wineries that produce excellent Cabernet Sauvignon.

The quality of winemaking has never been higher than today, so it is very possible to buy high-

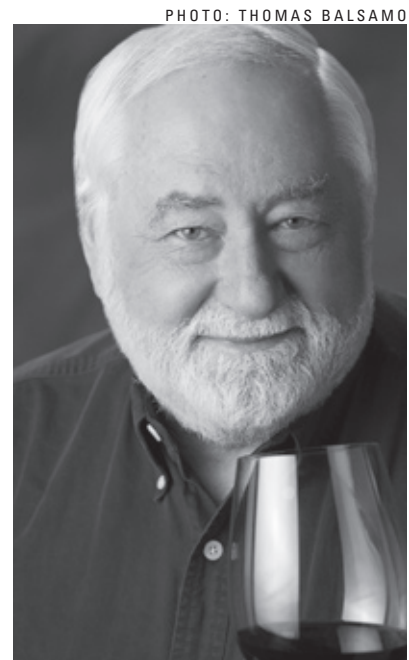


PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

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quality wine at relatively cheap prices. However, if you insist on boutique wineries from Napa, be prepared to pay stratospheric prices (\$250–\$500 a bottle) due to many factors, including the price of the land, minute yields, small production, the cachet factor, the quality of the wine, and the laws of supply and demand.

Icons in this league include Screaming Eagle, Harlan Estate, Bryant, and Araujo. The next level of the pyramid offers up some of my favorites, including Chateau Montelena, Stag's Leap Wine Cellars Cask 23, Caymus Special Selection, Ridge Montebello, Beringer Private Reserve, Rubicon, and Shafer Hillside Select, as well as numerous newcomers in the \$100–\$200 range, such as Hundred Acre, Colgin Cellars, and Dalla Valle (Maya). Below this price point, the quality level falls off very slowly, resulting in some very affordable (\$15–\$75) high-quality wines that I enjoy drinking.