

The Best Domestic Wines of the Year

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[Photos except where noted: Wes Rowe]

2015 was an interesting vintage. And I don't mean for wine: the grapes harvested this year are largely still in barrels and only time will tell how tasty they are. For me, though, harvest season brought a babbling baby girl and the end of a nine-month dry spell. By the time my baby was born in July, I hadn't drunk a bottle of wine since the previous fall. And I was thirsty.

To catch up on what I'd missed, I devoted the past few months to drinking a whole lot of American wine in the \$20 to \$50 range—old favorites and unfamiliar bottles I'd started seeing on restaurant lists, wines from up-and-comers working in shared warehouse spaces and young producers launching labels while still holding day jobs at more established wineries.


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By the time I lost track of how many wines I'd tasted—somewhere north of 100 bottles—and began to construct my list of favorites, one thing was clear. There are certainly great domestic examples of classic grapes such as Chardonnay and Zinfandel, but most of my top picks are hiding under less-familiar names. Some of today's best American winemakers are focusing on grapes you may have never heard of—grapes that are less expensive for producers to acquire and don't demand a crazy-high price at the wine store, either. If you want to drink well for your money, it pays to be open minded. This is the year to try American-grown Riesling, Nebbiolo, Barbera, and others.

Here are the wines that stopped me in my tracks this year.

Chardonnay

Last year I joined a gathering of winemakers at Sonoma's Michael Mara vineyard to taste a dozen or so different Chardonnays produced from the property's vines. It was no accident that so many different winemakers worked with these grapes: while planting the vineyard, Steve Matthiasson encountered what he says was the rockiest soil he'd seen in 20 years of vineyard work: "The rocks were finally surmounted and the vineyard produced a crop," Matthiasson says, but to cover the unexpectedly high costs of all that work, they had to sell most of the grapes to other wineries.

It was a chance to examine how the same fruit could turn into a broad range of wine styles, depending on when the grapes were picked, how long the wine spent in what type of barrels, and other winemaking choices. Several of the bottlings were memorable, but Matthiasson's wine really stood out. He picked most of his section of the vineyard very early to capture the bright tartness of the grapes, then harvested again later in the summer for the richer, more powerful flavors of riper fruit, adding the juice from the second harvest into the barrels where the earlier-picked juice was fermenting. In the glass, **Matthiasson Michael Mara 2013 Chardonnay** (\$55) is seamless, ready for your Thanksgiving turkey and perfect for tucking away for next summer's lobster roll. On one hand, it's all sun-ripened golden pear, but this wine glimmers with fine-grained minerals, too, taking you to that stony, dusty vineyard, whose soils were created by a landslide of rocks and volcanic debris down from the Sonoma Mountains to the valley below. Can't find this wine? I'd recommend pretty much [any bottle Matthiasson makes](#) .