

FOOD // WINE

# Top 100 Wines: The Best of the West Coast in 2014

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Pinot Noir grapes at the Falstaff vineyard near Sebastopol begin to turn to deep purple in July.

Photo: Brant Ward, The Chronicle

I've sung the praises of American wine in a lot of places this year. But the moment when I was finally assured of our communal progress happened far from this coast.

It was in London, at a tasting of California's newest and brightest, during a chat with Steven Spurrier. In 1976, Spurrier organized the Judgment of Paris tasting that made clear to the world that California wine was as good as French. Now, nearly 40 years later, he was encountering another collection of wines that displayed the same quality and ebullience as those that had so pleased him the first time around.

It was a thrilling moment. Our wine promise was again unmistakable even in a place where a love affair with American wine had gone cold.

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Variations on that moment were repeated throughout the year. I found unbound excitement for today's cutting-edge West Coast wines not just in San Francisco and New York, but in Phoenix, in Birmingham, Ala., and in Stockholm.

For several years I've made the case that this is a golden moment for American wine. Never has that felt more true. There are exceptional wines to be found all up and down the West Coast, which is the scope of my annual Top 100 Wines.

What's happening transcends that, though. American wine culture itself has matured. Wine, more than ever, is part of our lives.

That's a very different scenario from just eight years ago, and the first Top 100 Wines under my tenure. Yes, there was terrific quality at the time. But the wine industry was more cocky than confident. Innovation was too often buried under an endless pile of wine-by-the numbers.

By no means has the dull, lowest-common-denominator side of wine gone away; it never will. But today there is a growing roster of daring, curious winemakers willing to be guided by their own aesthetics rather than the old, narrow rules of critical praise.

Eight years ago, for instance, you'd be hard-pressed to talk about white wine beyond Chardonnay or Sauvignon Blanc, and perhaps the occasional Pinot Grigio. Today those are joined by everything from Trousseau Gris to Fiano.

Eight years ago, it would have been hard to imagine a wine like the 2013 Lo-Fi Cabernet Franc, fresh and approachable and owing fealty neither to the Loire nor Bordeaux — only to its Santa Barbara home. For such a wine to find a market today is tribute to how far we've come, and how quickly.

While today's West Coast winemakers see the beauty of the new, they understand better than ever the context in which they work, whether it's Oregon's 50-year history or a California wine legacy that predates statehood. They are considering not just the easy but the edge of the possible, just as previous generations did when they looked west. But they balance that with a long view of tradition.

And they are being cheered on by a new generation of wine lovers who view wine not with fear but with intrigue and wonder. These emerging drinkers buy out of curiosity rather than habit. They thrill over the increasingly diverse world of wine out there to drink.

That helps to explain why, this year, I've seen great evidence that West Coast Cabernet is making a proud return to its savory roots after years chasing unbound fruit.

Both Chardonnay and Pinot Noir here can finally thrive in their own self-assured contexts, rather than being haunted by the specter of Burgundy. For sure, there is lots of Chardonnay still trapped in the cheap makeup aisle. But life is too short to be stymied by bad Chardonnay. Instead, let's exult in how many current examples display grace and confidence rather than the excesses of the cellar.

No different with Pinot Noir, especially with a 2012 vintage that balanced ripeness and nuance in the best wines. It is once again our largest category, nearly a quarter of the list, with standouts from familiar names like Eyrie and Littorai, and emerging ones like Iota and Kutch.

The diversity of both whites and reds continues to grow. California's 19th century legacy of Zinfandel and Carignane has returned in the best way, with timeless wines from Turley, Carlisle and Calder that brim with the virtues of old vines and great soils. Chenin Blanc, a grape long with us but never nominated for greatness, is now the base material for some of the best white winemaking on any continent.

These familiar grapes are matched with the young boldness of American Gamay Noir, which in a decade has grown from a footnote to a reasonable pursuit. And by the nascent pleasures of Trousseau. And Picpoul. And Malvasia.

Syrah and Grenache, too, are resplendent, with wines from producers like Wind Gap and A Tribute to Grace that neither chase the blueprint of the Rhone nor fall prey to the previous decade's excesses.

Even our best sparkling wines are being recast. We're well past the notion of replicating Champagne on these shores. Instead, a handful of wineries is looking beyond industrial-scale efforts and making wines with a specificity of place and purity of flavor.

If there's a dark lining to all this, it's the same one that has lingered for years: West Coast wines are still too expensive to make, and drink, on an artisan scale. There isn't a wine in this year's Top 100 that I believe is unfairly priced. But too many others were rejected not because they weren't delicious but because they weren't exceptional enough to justify their price tags.

That tricky balance between unique and affordable deserves more attention, because there hasn't been a time since Prohibition when small-scale workmanship — real wine made by real people — has had such a willing audience. Restaurants from Seattle to San Diego crave the local and specific. They are defining modern American cuisine, and they want wines that are less fetish and more a natural part of the culture of the table.

There is much in this year's Top 100 Wines to match that description. It's a reflection of the simple fact that the West Coast and its wine culture today can stand equal with any other in the world.

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