

TOP 100 WINES 2011

Jon Bonné, Chronicle Wine Editor Published 4:00 am PST, Sunday, December 4, 2011



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As I approached the finish line for this year's Top 100 Wines, it became clear that 2011 would build on a welcome trend from last year: the triumph of the little guy.

Certainly we have great bottles here from bigger names. But once again, many of the best wines to be found on the West Coast are from wineries that work on a small scale.

This shift in scope makes perfect sense. There is always the opportunity to make great wine on a big scale; the beauty of the **Louis Martini** Sonoma County Cabernet or Domaine Chandon's Brut Classic

are perfect evidence. But the attention to detail you get on a small scale is an engine for greatness.

More often than not, greatness is a matter of one or two people meticulously keeping an eye on every step of farming and every step in the cellar, whether you're **Bob Betz** making a few hundred cases of single-vineyard Syrah, or Bob and **Jim Varner** extending their Chardonnay talents to thousands of cases of Foxglove.

This attentiveness from vintners mirrors a desire by more wine lovers to look beyond scores and dive into the particulars of the wines they enjoy. That knowledge-is-power approach also helps explain one big change you'll notice in this year's list: the inclusion of alcohol levels for each wine.

Prompted by longtime reader interest in the topic, The Chronicle in April began printing alcohol content for each wine we recommend. Alcohol levels shouldn't be a final barometer of quality - I found top wines below 12 percent and well above 14 percent - but they are useful to consider when shopping. Now as you browse the Top 100 list, you can compare my selections by one more data point.

It also is clear that the best West Coast winemaking is acquiring an ever lighter touch, helped in part by generally milder conditions in the 2009 and 2010 vintages. We began to see shifts in wine styles in last year's Top 100; that trend is clearly continuing, which is good news for those who prefer subtlety over raw power.

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Witness the new self-assuredness of domestic Chardonnay, which is rebounding from its era of excess and showing the distinctive side of what can be an easily abused grape. New labels like Cartha and Sandhi are unveiling impressive bottles that embrace the best traditions of Chardonnay not just from California, but from anywhere in the world.

For that matter, there's the beauty of Pinot Noir in 2009. Here's a grape that's still struggling with fame, and yet for all the overwrought and overprocessed versions, there are more vintners than ever seeking to express its purity.

Whether it's interpretations of sites like the Demuth or Suacci vineyards, **Gavin Chanin's** sublime take on Bien Nacido or **Anam Cara's** contemplative expression from Oregon's Chehalem Mountains, there is a widespread interest in making wines that do more than pay lip service to a true sense of place. The transparency of winemaking in Pinot Noir is better than ever, and the result is that the best of American Pinot can now rightfully sit next to the finest specimens from anywhere in the world.

Great winemaking can appear in more unexpected



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THE CHRONICLE'S TOP 100 WINES FOR 2000



Sonoma Coast 2009 Pinot Noir: Chronicle recommends

forms. The innovative work in white wine is changing the playing field. We've been acknowledging the quality of unique blends for a couple years, and this year such bottles as **Arbe Garbe's** Pinot Grigio-driven effort are not simply intriguing; they're paving a path to the future. Add in the rise of great Grenache Blanc and Albarino and even impressive Colombard, and you have a diversity of white wine that hasn't been witnessed on these shores since the carefree early years of California's modern wine era.

It is a great time to be a winemaker who is willing to take risks. A new generation of West Coast wines is finding a welcome reception much farther afield; you're as likely to run into a wine lover in New York rhapsodizing about La Clarine Farm or Ryme Cellars as you are in San Francisco. These wines often find an audience without a marketing budget or a big-dollar distributor, and they prove the power of American craft.

It is also a great time to be a devotee of wines from this coast. So let's pay tribute to those who think small - and their exceptional work to keep our glasses filled with something wonderful.

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SPARKLING WINE

The American sparkling wine industry is clearly being pulled in two directions. One school of thought sees a need for sweeter, easy-to-please bottles. The other is holding true to the vision of pioneers like Schramsberg, trying to create crisp, food-loving alternatives to French Champagne.

That latter style is proliferating in regular nonvintage brut as well as vintage and rosé bottlings. Top houses are hunting colder vineyard sites and reducing the amount of added sugar used to finesse the wines. The result is more sublime and affordable bottles that can be enjoyed year-round.

NV Domaine Carneros Cuvee de la Pompadour Carneros Brut Rosé (\$36, 12% alcohol):

There's some finesse at work on Duhig Road, seeing as the pink version of Carneros' brut shows a remarkable focus and distinction, with depth from added Pinot Noir. Accents of rose hip, damp stone and bread dough provide depth to this tight-knit, raspberry-inflected effort.

NV Domaine Chandon Brut Classic California Sparkling (\$22, 13%):

Winemaker Tom Tiburzi has been fine-tuning Chandon's trademark bottle, with less added sweetness and more focus on the fruit. It's paying off beautifully, with rich pear-tart aromas and a bounty of fruit and pastry flavors. The bright lemon-oil and sea-foam accents signal a wine with serious intent.

2000 Gloria Ferrer Carneros Cuvee Carneros Sparkling (\$50, 12.5%):

This long-aged reserve bottle from Ferrer shows its commitment to the potential of Carneros. After a full decade on its lees, this is simultaneously opulent and precise. Aromas of citrus pith, thyme, pear skin and yeast underscore remarkable youth for a 10-year-old wine.

NV J Vineyards Russian River Valley Brut Rosé (\$28, 12.5%):

There's a return to form at this **Healdsburg house**, with its pink brut offering a sweet yeasty note that underscores raspberry and rose petal, and vibrant citrus tying it all together in a mouthwatering way. Think of it for the holiday table.

NV Roederer Estate Anderson Valley Brut Rosé (\$27, 12%):

Roederer's rosé in particular remains a standout, a sign of winemaker **Arnaud Weyrich**'s talents. Subtle notes of rose, copper and peach, with a warm vanilla-bean accent and cool berry ice flavors.

NV Scharffenberger Mendocino County Brut (\$19, 12%):

Now affiliated with its neighbor, Roederer Estate, this longtime local fave (just renamed Brut Excellence) has found a new level of precision for its quintessentially California style of sparkling. There's just a hint of a soft side to an otherwise steely texture, with green apple, poppy seed and morning bun flavors underscored by a

perfect mineral bite. The best hidden value in American fizz.

NV Schramsberg Mirabelle North Coast Brut (\$25, 12.8%): Schramsberg's nonvintage second bottling is stellar right now. A Chardonnay-dominant blend is fresh with tree fruit, freesia and chalk accents, and a wonderful strawberry edge from its Pinot Noir. Just enough breadly opulence without losing its playfulness.

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CHARDONNAY

Earlier this year I prognosticated that American Chardonnay had snapped back from its baroque years (go to: sfg.ly/vxCOuI) and was again ready to shine.

With one major exception, our tastings this year proved this theory beautifully, aided by the subtlety of the 2009 vintage.

There are serious winemakers making Chardonnay that speaks of its origins and potential, without having to resort to excess. It is, frankly, the best time in years to be drinking Chardonnay from these shores.

2010 Arnot-Roberts Watson Ranch Napa Valley Chardonnay (\$30, 13.2% alcohol): **Duncan Meyers** and **Nathan Roberts** have turned out another stellar lineup this year for their micro-label, but this bottling from a vineyard in the very south end of Napa is more proof that Napa Chardonnay can thrive when handled with care. While their effort from nearby Green Island had more salinity, this is stony and steely, with ripe apple and an exotic pineapple-skin aspect, plus marjoram and lemon zest accents.

2009 Bergstrom Old Stones Willamette Valley Chardonnay (\$30, 13.9%): Josh Bergstrom insists that Old Stones is for early drinking, but there's extraordinary depth here. Ripe and intense, this adds deep, creamy tones to bright apple, Meyer lemon and apricot flavors, with a wild-mushroom accent. A quintessence of Oregon Chardonnay.

2009 Kongsgaard Napa Valley Chardonnay (\$75, 14.1%): Many consider John Kongsgaard to be California's Chardonnay master, but this 2009 arguably is the finest Chardonnay he has made yet, and perhaps the one with the most nimble step. From the nonpareil Hudson and Hyde vineyards, it has a racier, tighter profile than usual, with a crazy level of focus; this wine stares you down and won't blink. Peach skin and lime pith, with a white-stone minerality, are just the start of the many seamless layers of flavor within.

2009 Hirsch Vineyards Sonoma Coast Chardonnay (\$50, 14%): Hirsch's rare white bottling, fine-tuned by new winemaker Ross Cobb, harnesses dramatically powerful fruit from 3.9 acres planted on its coastal ridgetop in 1994 and 2006. Once again, a unique mix of aging in oak, steel and small glass vessels brings a fullness to the saline, mouthwatering presence of stone fruit edged with thyme, green apple and quince. Layered and pure, an expression of Chardonnay's true potential.

2009 Cartha Sonoma Coast Chardonnay (\$27, 13.5%): A new value-minded project (the name means "those who do the work" in Sanskrit) from winemaker John Raytek (Ceritas) and vineyard manager Glenn Alexander. The Petaluma Gap is its geographic heart, and there's a cool mint aspect to dried peach, sandalwood and hay. The sort of refined effort that usually commands twice the price.

2009 Evening Land Vineyards La Source Seven Springs Vineyard Eola-Amity Hills Chardonnay (\$60, 13%): Hollywood producer Mark Tarlov's new project has attracted a star roster of talent, including Larry Stone (Rubicon) and consultant Dominique Lafon. But his Oregon winemaker, Isabelle Meunier, deserves credit for evoking the best of a lauded Willamette Valley property. There is a laser focus to the flavors in this filigreed effort, as Meunier has found a nervy power to the fruit. It unfolds slowly, picking up flesh from beautiful flavors of lemon peel, dried honeycomb and green apple. Without an ounce of fat, this is Chardonnay expressed as pure sinew.

2009 Failla Estate Vineyard Sonoma Coast Chardonnay (\$44, 14.2%): From Ehren Jordan's dry-farmed estate parcel near Cazadero comes a glorious, muscular specimen of **California Chardonnay**. A gorgeous 2010 bottling is almost on shelves, and yet this is still at least two years from being ready. Heathery wood aromas harmonize its taut accents of granite and marjoram and kaffir lime with powerful, dense lemon and pear skin flavors. A great mineral intensity signals that this is Chardonnay for the ages.

2010 Fess Parker Ashley's Sta. Rita Hills Chardonnay (\$35, 14.1%): The vineyard formerly known as Ashley's is now owned by Bill Foley (and called Rancho Las Hermanas), but the Fess Parker label found a gorgeous, outgoing expression in this cooler year. Great saline intensity balances out ripe fig, Cavaillon melon and lime flavors, and a barrel-driven richness. Proof that a full-bore style can work when done right.

2009 Foxglove Central Coast Chardonnay (\$14, 13.9%): While their single-vineyard efforts from 2009 impress on their own, there's something to be said for the gorgeous quality that Bob and Jim Varner harness in their larger-production Central Coast wine. Made in steel, brimming with quince and ripe pear and all the pretty tree-fruit flavors of Chardonnay, this is an example of the winemaking elite wanting to work with fruit that over-delivers. That two of the state's top talents are on a mission to make an everyday wine is an example that far more winemakers should emulate.

2009 Hanzell Sonoma County Chardonnay (\$60, 14.5%): Under winemaker Michael McNeill, Hanzell has found a solid return to its best attributes: a powerful expression of a famous Sonoma site. The '09 is marked by a welcome subtlety - quiet oak appearing more as a welcome roast-peanut accent (think of it like being at a favorite baseball game) to profound lemon and fig fruit, with pastry cream and heather accents. Its evident mineral power and pure fruit portend a long life ahead.

2009 Sandhi Santa Barbara County Chardonnay (\$28, 13.3%): This new label from a star lineup of Rajat Parr (Mina Group), investor Charles Banks and winemaker Sashi Moorman is upending the conventional wisdom about the Sta. Rita Hills. Not to dismiss the extraordinary quality of its Sanford & Benedict bottling, but this more modest effort - basically declassified S&B made in neutral oak - shows tremendous stony depth. Lots of lemon pith, tangerine, green olive and salt, with winter melon and a true minerality that's matched by subtle lees presence. Focused, pure and a stunning example of the new California Chardonnay.

2009 Stoller Vineyards SV Estate Dundee Hills Chardonnay (\$28, 14%): Bill Stoller's site, at the hands of winemaker Melissa Burr, remains a top spot for not only Pinot but Chardonnay, too. This latest is concentrated and stylish, with lots of pastry cream and nuanced oak giving richness to the energetic lemon pulp, peach and Anjou pear.

2009 Tor Kenward Wente Clone Napa Valley Chardonnay (\$54, 14.6%): Industry veteran

Tor Kenward and winemaker Jeff Ames have taken the template of blockbuster Chardonnay, applied it to a rocky portion of the Hudson vineyard, and devised a savvy tribute to the Wente vine clone. Hefty and polished, with evident oak and roasted lemon aromas balanced by the Wente nuance: lemongrass, caramel and a pear-drop sweetness. A gorgeously layered effort for this heavy-hitting style.

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SAUVIGNON BLANC

Once again, Sauvignon Blanc's dual personality is on display. While the wine can serve as an also-ran among whites - we ignored those - it has become a playground for winemakers to do some of their most daring, most interesting work.

Each one of these wines shows a distinct personality, reflecting not only their home turf but also talented work in the cellar. These winemakers may have other great Sauvignon Blanc on the brain, whether from Pouilly-Fumé or Italy, but their work is uniquely American in scope.

2010 Benziger Signaterra Shone Farm Vineyard Russian River Valley Sauvignon Blanc (\$24, 14.1% alcohol): Once again, Benziger's Shone Farm effort provides a benchmark for **California Sauvignon Blanc**. This time the cooler year retained intense acidity that bolsters wet grass and jalapeno aromas, with deep apricot, saline and citrus peel, and a brilliant textural depth.

2010 Bernardus Griva Vineyard Arroyo Seco Sauvignon Blanc (\$20, 13.5%): This **Carmel** Valley label looked to Arroyo Seco for a compelling expression, with some Sauvignon Musqué clone and Semillon blended in. Think of it as a greyhound, capturing the best of the variety's lean, green side: Padron pepper, bay laurel and verbena all play a role amid the racy fruit.

2010 Brander Au Naturel Santa Ynez Valley Sauvignon Blanc (\$32, 13.9%): Brander's ode to the Loire-focused greatness of this grape delivers brilliantly. A full day of soaking on the grape skins brings an opulent mouthfeel to this lavish, fig-scented bottle. The grassy notes are subtle, amid lots of ripe tangerine. A perfect framework for the complexity of great fruit.

2010 Grgich Hills Estate Napa Valley Fumé Blanc (\$30, 14.3%): Mike Grgich's Napa legacy is in spectacular form right now, with this dramatic verbena-accented bottle from biodynamically farmed estate parcels in American Canyon and Carneros. Racy but deep flavored, it's a style that - for all the quaintness of the name - is very much a sign of the new Napa.

2009 The Ojai Vineyard McGinley Vineyard Santa Ynez Valley Sauvignon Blanc (\$28, 14%): Adam Tolmach remains one of California's defining Pinot names, but his Sauvignon Blanc shows another side of his talent. Organically grown on a mix of shale and serpentine subsoils, and aged in neutral oak barrels without lees stirring, this finds a balance of richness and deep acidity, accented by aromas of Anaheim pepper and bay leaf. Keeps pace with the best Sauvignon from anywhere.

2010 Spottswoode Napa-Sonoma Counties Sauvignon Blanc (\$36, 14.1%): It might seem unusual to choose the white wine from this legendary Cabernet house, but Sauvignon Blanc is owner Mary Novak's preferred wine, and Spottswoode has turned it into an art form. A mix of six vineyards in two counties, fermented in a variety of vessels, brings world-class density to flavors of lemon, vanilla and apricot tart, with pitch-perfect acidity from a racy vintage.

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OTHER WHITES AND ROSÉ

Last year, there were ample signs that "other" was where the most interesting work was being done in white wine. As detailed earlier this year (go to: sfg.ly/rpJL81), this interest in life beyond Chardonnay and Pinot Grigio has reached critical mass, giving ever more winemakers an opportunity to do some of their best, most rewarding work.

Whether it's the emergence of great Rhone-style whites, the revisiting of long-dismissed grapes or masterful work with nontraditional blends, there are more reasons than ever to be a white-wine drinker on the West Coast.

There are great reasons to be a rosé fan, too: More winemakers are getting serious about pink wine as

something to be perfected for drinking throughout the year.

2010 Arbe Garbe Russian River Valley White (\$28, 14.3% alcohol): Friulian natives Enrico Bertoz and Letizia Pauletto pay tribute to their native and adopted homes with this brilliant blend, a mix of Pinot Grigio, Malvasia Bianca and Ribolla Gialla from Saralee's Vineyard in Windsor and George Vare's site in Napa. A phenolic power defines it - it's almost chewy with citrus pith and apricot leather, plus a searing acidity and dramatic snap pea, saline and fresh white-flower accents. It's a testament to the greatness of white wine blending.

2010 Birichino Monterey Malvasia Bianca (\$15, 13%): This new effort from Bonny Doon veterans John Locke and Alex Krause hit the ground running, with a batch of this aromatic Italian variety found near the Santa Lucia range. Savvy winemaking brings a dense texture to rich orange and pear fruit, just the thing to give depth to Malvasia's heady floral and nutmeg aromas, which burst from the glass.

2010 Donkey & Goat Coupe d'Or El Dorado Roussanne-Marsanne (\$32, 13%): Berkeley's Tracey and Jared Brandt, among our most recent Winemakers to Watch, keep tapping the high-elevation granite soils of the Fenaughty Vineyard for this profound white blend. Some textural depth from grape skins, with a tremendous herbal and mineral freshness: hay, lavender, lime zest, chalk and pear. It can be austere and almost polarizing at times, but the ripeness and tremendous acidity make for an energetic, unique take on Rhone-style blends.

2010 Forlorn Hope Que Saudade DeWitt Vineyard Amador County Verdelho (\$24, 14.1%): Matthew Rorick's label devoted to "rare creatures" can veer into esoterica, but there's nothing odd about his take on this Portuguese grape and its clear adaptation to the Sierra foothills. Scents of nori and pear add complexity to ripe tangerine and apricot fruit and a beautiful lime-rickey tartness that's the very essence of Verdelho.

2010 Horse & Plow North Coast Rosé (\$15, 13.9%): This label from Suzanne Hagins (Lutea) and her husband, Chris Condos (Vinum Cellars), dabbles widely. But their rosé, a mostly barrel-fermented mix of Carignane, Syrah and Grenache sourced mostly from an old organically farmed vineyard north of Ukiah, is in fantastic form with its spicy bite: black pepper and celery seed give a kick to orange peel and apricot flavors.

2010 Kinero Alice Paso Robles Grenache Blanc (\$22, 13.1%): Denner winemaker Anthony Yount's own Paso label is focused on Rhone-style whites, and this effort from Luna Matta and Blackseth vineyards on Paso's west side shows how well Grenache Blanc is adapted to the area. Yount's use of stainless-steel barrels provides depth to deep citrus and green-herb notes, with peach and white raspberry rounding out a brilliant effort that finds the right pitch between rich and edgy.

2010 Massican Annia Napa Valley White Wine (\$26, 12.1%): Dan Petroski's personal project (by day he's making wine at Larkmead) would be interesting just for its unusual blends, but the Annia has come into its own as a serious wine. A mix of Tocai Friulano, Ribolla Gialla and Chardonnay, it's nearly electric with alpine flowers, ripe almond and Meyer lemon. This time there's notably dense flavor and extract, matched by dramatic acidity from the cool vintage.

2010 Matthiasson Napa Valley White Wine (\$35, 12.5%): When not doing some of the best vineyard work in Napa, Steve Matthiasson keeps fine-tuning his brilliant white blend, this time a co-fermented mix of Sauvignon Blanc, Ribolla Gialla, Semillon and Tocai Friulano. It's more subtle and focused than ever, and time in bottle has given flesh to steely chive, key lime and orange notes. It'll be even better in a year - no surprise considering its inspiration in the long-aging whites of Italy and Bordeaux.

2010 Qupé Santa Ynez Valley Marsanne (\$18, 13%): Syrah may be his calling card, but Qupé's Bob Lindquist has faithfully been making this world-class white since 1987. He evokes the rich almondy tones that define the great white grape of the northern Rhone, and brings out a crucial edge to its lemon and apricot flavors. His Marsanne can routinely improve for more than a decade in the cellar (for more, go to: sfg.ly/lq1N55), making it one of California's best values in white wine.

2010 Pacific Rim Columbia Valley Riesling (\$10, 10.5%): Under the eye of winemaker Nicolas Quillé, this Randall Grahm-founded label is proving the potential of Washington Riesling. Don't let the faux-exotic package and price deceive you; this blend from top Columbia Valley sites puts Pacific Rim fully back in the groove. Full of wet river stone, deep nectarine and green apple, it shows the magnitude of both fruit and acid that most Rieslings at this price lack.

2010 Ryme Cellars His/Hers Las Brisas Vineyard Carneros Vermentino (\$32,

14.2%/13.8%): Technically these are two wines, but instead let's consider it two interpretations of the same fruit - specifically Vermentino made by the husband-wife team of Megan and Ryan Glaab. He wanted a tribute to skin-fermented Italian whites; she had the freshness of Liguria and Sardinia in mind. His is resinous and powerful, with pine pitch, dried apricot and pear skin - a textural masterpiece. Hers is subtle and fresh, with sea salt, hay, peach and ripe guava - and a limpid, but leaner, texture. Both are extraordinary, a successful exploration of winemaking style.

2010 Skinner Stoney Creek Vineyard Fair Play Grenache Blanc (\$22, 13.3%): Winemaker Chris Pittenger is bringing impressive finesse to this new label from the Sierra foothills. This varietal Grenache Blanc, from the Skinner family's estate parcel and the Swansboro vineyard farmed by Ron Mansfield is a pitch-perfect example of that grape, with a ripe almond, pear and lemon-zest profile, plus orange and chalky stone highlights. A great mix of flesh and focus, with a chervil edge to the finish.

2010 Tablas Creek Patelin de Tablas Blanc Paso Robles White (\$20, 13.5%): After years of struggling with how to make an affordable table wine, Tablas' Jason Haas released his solution, sourced from vineyards near his family's west-side Paso Robles estate. As a younger sibling of the Esprit de Beaucastel white wines, it's got wonderful depth from Grenache Blanc, Viognier, Roussanne and Marsanne - with subtle mineral and honeysuckle accents to its ripe tangerine fruit.

2010 Verdad Sawyer-Lindquist Vineyard Edna Valley Albarino (\$22, 13.3%): Louisa Sawyer Lindquist has long been making a case for Spanish varieties on the Central Coast, but her biodynamic vineyard is now turning out perhaps the best Albarino in the state, no small feat for a rising-star variety. The lean vintage brought a racy, Riesling-like note to the nose - wet stones, ripe grapefruit, bay leaf and peach.

2010 Vaughn Duffy Sonoma County Rosé of Pinot Noir (\$15, 13.2%): While the 2009 Pinot from Matt Duffy, who apprenticed at Siduri, was an amazing debut, the nuance in his subtle rosé, blended from three vineyards, is a real testament to his talent. It brims with the best of Pinot's expression in pink form: wintergreen, strawberry and moss in a refined, steely package.

2010 Y. Rousseau Old Vines Russian River Valley Colombard (\$17, 13.2%): Here's a tribute to a California workhorse - Colombard, the state's second-most planted white grape - as Yannick

Rousseau nods to his native Gascony with one of the friendliest table wines of the year. From 35-year-old vines, he applies deft winemaking to extract extra depth from the grape skins, for a bottle redolent with mandarin peel and ripe fruit, plus fern and honey accents. No surprise it has become its own little cult hit in Wine Country.

2010 Zocker Paragon Vineyard Edna Valley Gruner Veltliner (\$19, 13.5%): The first couple vintages of this bold effort from the Central Coast's Niven family were fun curiosities. But with 2010, they've shown that this is more than a sideshow. There's quality here to make Austrians want to take a closer look at Edna Valley terroir, for a wine packed with snappy pea-shoot, quince, celery and vibrant stoniness.

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RHONE-STYLE REDS

The American interpretation of French Rhone Valley wines keeps getting better - and more diverse.

Where we used to make Syrah a big component of this section, its fortunes have wobbled a bit in quality and in interest among wine drinkers. There's still great Syrah, often from colder spots like the remote Sonoma Coast, but there's all the reason in the world to embrace other pieces of the patchwork: juicy Grenache that deserves deep praise, nuanced blends, heady Mourvedre. These wines are beginning to emerge from Syrah's long shadow and shine on their own.

Whether you're a Syrah loyalist or just a red wine lover, here's to wonderful diversity inherited from the Rhone - and proudly claimed here.

2009 Amavi Walla Walla Valley Syrah (\$29, 14.1% alcohol): Jean-Francois Pellet's value-minded label again tapped into the best of Walla Walla, with fruit from Seven Hills, Pepper Bridge and Les Collines in this prime example of Washington's cellar-worthy bounty. Steely and pepper riven, with a classic tarry hint, dried thyme and pretty plum fruit. A lot of chew to the structure, so give it a couple of years to truly blossom.

2009 Barnwood Santa Barbara Highlands Vineyard Santa Barbara County Grenache

(\$22, 14.3%): From a high-elevation site near Ventucopa, on the edge of Santa Barbara and Kern counties, comes some of the country's best Grenache - including this affordable, delicious bottle from Laetitia's other label. Compelling scents of conifer, lavender and berries give an edge to dark berry fruit.

2009 Betz Family La Cote Patriarche Yakima Valley Syrah (\$55, 14.7%): It was hard to choose between Bob Betz's stupendous 2008 Cabernet and this Syrah, but ultimately it's this wine that's a dual tribute to Washington greatness: the talents of Betz, a master of wine, and Mike Sauer, whose Red Willow vineyard was the state's defining Syrah site and the source for Patriarche. Volcanic stone and roasted peppercorn scents provide a brooding prelude to a savory mix of plum and soy, with astoundingly refined tannins. That texture is the true signature of two Northwest masters at work - one in the vineyard, one in the cellar.

2008 Bokisch Terra Alta Vineyard Clements Hills-Lodi Garnacha (\$18, 14.5%): The Bokisch mission - to highlight Lodi's potential with Spanish varieties - takes a brilliant turn with this eminently drinkable Grenache, featuring juicy strawberry fruit, energetic minerality and cinnamon accents.

2010 La Clarine Farm Cedarville Sierra Foothills Mourvedre (\$22, 14.2%): Hank Beckmeyer and Caroline Hoel are quietly rewriting the rules in the Sierra with their tiny label, and this brilliantly heady bottle aged in neutral oak may be their best effort yet. Whole grape clusters provide a burst of thyme and dried sage in the glass, accented by tart red berry and a chalk minerality. Grippy and lean, with a hint of balsam, this is Mourvedre reinterpreted.

2009 Leojami Pierce Ranch Vineyard San Antonio Valley Grenache (\$20, 13.9%): For his recently launched label, Ben Spencer turned to a lesser-known part of Monterey County for a pure, heady expression that shows Grenache's best side. Aged in older oak, it's transparent in the best way, packed with buoyant fruit and a warm kirsch note, plus sage, wild strawberry and mace.

2009 Minassian Young Cuvee de Paso Paso Robles Red (\$24, 14.8%): David and Amparo Young show a subtle side of Paso from their dry-farmed vineyards in the area's west side. This mix of Mourvedre, Counoise, Syrah and Grenache Blanc lithely combines white pepper, dried fern and a raft of berry flavors with a tangy-salty edge.

2008 Wind Gap Sonoma Coast Syrah (\$36, 12.1%): Pax Mahle made his name on Syrah, and for all his success with more unusual options (Trousseau Gris, Blaufrankisch) under his Wind Gap label, his Syrah remains stellar. From a mix of sites including Clary Ranch and Majik, this is packed with gorgeous pepper, lilac and cinnamon amid wild blueberry and bramble. The knotted tannins give it the guts that Syrah needs without relying on sheer power. When you get to the final hints of green olive and roasted thyme, you realize the aromatic brilliance at work.

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PINOT NOIR

After last year's Pinot list, it seemed we had entered a game of brinksmanship. With 28 wines, Pinot Noir occupied the biggest share of the Top 100. How much more attention could be paid?

We've shrunk the number slightly this year, although Pinot still accounts for nearly one-quarter of the Top 100 roster. In no way does that signal a dip in quality.

The 2009 vintage that dominates here was a benchmark for California (for Oregon too, but differently). It was the best chance in perhaps a decade to make finessed, aromatically powerful Pinot Noir that showed the full potential of great terroir. Pay attention to the vineyard names below. If they're not familiar already, they are worth remembering.

As for winemakers? More Pinot devotees seemed to be driven to perfect a lighter touch, even as defenders of what one vintner termed a "flamboyant" style maintained their heavy-hitting ways. Thus 2009, and the two subsequent vintages, mark the core of a stylistic battle for Pinot's soul.

What you see here is a sampling of the finest results from that showdown. There may be quick reward in crafting a bottle built around sweet flavors and immediate gratification, but Pinot's most serious West Coast practitioners are making wine to remember.

2009 Alta Maria Vineyards Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir (\$28, 13.9% alcohol): Paul Wilkins and James Ontiveros, two past Winemakers to Watch, are again fine-tuning this affordable blend using their detailed knowledge of Santa Maria vineyards. Aged in mostly neutral oak, it opens to show

cranberry and ponzu amid a warm loamy earth tone. Juicy red fruit defines the core of its impressive flavors.

2009 Anam Cara Nicholas Estate Chehalem Mountains Pinot Noir (\$32, 13.6%): For yet another vintage, Sheila and Nick Nicholas show the best of Oregon's small-scale charms with their Newberg estate bottling, aged mostly in older oak. There's a classic minty, cool profile here, with camphor, bayberry and a wonderful floral accent. Almost ethereal in its flavors, but with plenty of tannic stuffing.

2009 Anthill Farms Demuth Vineyard Anderson Valley Pinot Noir (\$42, 13.3%): The Anthill trio turned out a stellar line in 2009, but this vineyard designate is likely something to watch, seeing as Anthill's Anthony Filiberti now works for Demuth's new owner (see below). Steely and cool on the nose, this is like raspberry ice with a balsamic edge. The chewy berry fruit shows a chalky mineral aspect that's the very essence of Anderson Valley's tension-filled style.

2009 Arterberry Maresh Dundee Hills Pinot Noir (\$25, 13%): A stunning value from Oregon as Jim Arterberry Maresh shows off the best of both his family's vineyard and the red soils of Dundee Hills in a basic bottling that over-delivers. There's gorgeous polish and delicacy that reveals '09's subtler side, with a spicy accent leading to soy and tangerine, and rewarding cherry flavors.

2008 Calera Reed Vineyard Mt. Harlan Pinot Noir (\$50, 14.9%): Quite simply, one of the best wines Josh Jensen has made - and that's a big statement. From this low-yielding harvest (0.37 tons/acre) off one of his oldest parcels atop Mt. Harlan come the dramatic heights of Pinot Noir: The intensity of the dried forest floor and soy aromas practically smack you, and there's a tremendous red-fruit power and mineral-edged tannin that gives this wine energy even with its prodigious size. Ready to cellar at least a decade.

2009 Chanin Bien Nacido Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir (\$50, 13.8%): Gavin Chanin's work at Au Bon Climat, in the heart of Bien Nacido, has more than paid off. He's probably making the most intricate, nuanced wine off this famous Santa Barbara parcel right now. The radiant quality of the nose hits you first: tons of subtle soy and moist earth, with a quiet sachet note, plus tense fruit flavors of cranberry, lemon oil and wild strawberry. Amazing refinement; a wine full of life and savory energy for the future.

2009 Copain Tous Ensemble Anderson Valley Pinot Noir (\$28, 12.9%): While it's hard to dispute the profundities of his 2009 Kiser 'en Haut,' Wells Guthrie's affordable entry-level bottle shows how much work he puts into every tier of his winery. A tremendous amount of Pinot for the dollar. For its lean structure it shows a ton of ripe raspberry fruit, heady tangerine and soy nuances.

2009 Drew Morning Dew Vineyard Anderson Valley Pinot Noir (\$47, 13.4%): Another stupendous Mendocino matchup, with the talented Jason Drew tapping fruit from this Philo vineyard farmed by Williams Selyem founder Burt Williams. It needs time, as Drew wines often do, but it's constantly unfolding - musky in one moment, a bolt of blue fruit and wet stone in the next. A serious, cellar-worthy interpretation of Anderson Valley.

2009 Freeman Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$44, 14.1%): Ken and Akiko Freeman and winemaker Ed Kurtzman turned out an impressive lineup in the 2009 vintage, but this blend from around the appellation - including the Rayhill and Sexton Road sites near Sebastopol's Bodega Highway, plus Occidental and Petaluma - is cool and no nonsense, full of saline edge. Aromas of damp forest - think redwoods after a rain - mix with bright raspberry and duskier bayberry. Finessed and beautifully subtle.

2009 Freestone Pastoral Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$75, 14.1%): Joseph Phelps' Pinot project takes a heavier bent at times, but winemaker Theresa Heredia got free rein with this forthcoming, rare single-vineyard blockbuster, sourced from two Calera-selection blocks on Freestone's estate. With a heavy dose of whole grape clusters, it bursts with forest floor and matsutake mushroom aromas. Supple huckleberry and watermelon rind mark a fruit presence that's ethereal, marked by heady spice and weightlessness. This is Pinot mastery of the highest order.

2009 Ghostwriter Woodruff Family Vineyard Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir (\$45, 13.5%): Kenny Likitprakong (Hobo Wine) returns to his Santa Cruz winemaking roots with his use of this newly revived old-vine site near Corralitos, with a supple, spicy huckleberry-filled effort. Aromas of coriander, forest floor and lemon rind round out a bottle that shows the great potential of this largely undiscovered area just east of Santa Cruz.

2009 J.K. Carriere Provocateur Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$24, 13.5%): There's

something to be said for affordable, early drinking Pinot, and Oregon native Jim Prosser has delivered a beauty, full of tension and freshness. A coppery mineral accent gives depth to chewy plum skin and watermelon. It's proof that immediate-gratification Pinot can still be rewarding when made with care.

2009 Knez Winery Cerise Vineyard Anderson Valley Pinot Noir (\$39, 13.4%): It might taste like old-time Anderson Valley, but here's a sign of the area going back to the future. From Peter Knez, who purchased the stellar Cerise and Demuth sites a few years ago, and made by Anthill Farms' Anthony Filiberti, this meshes subtle oak perfume with a tightly wound package of cardamom, carnation and cherry blossom, and coppery berry fruit.

2009 Kutch Falstaff Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$39, 13.1%): Jamie Kutch's shift to a lighter winemaking style has seriously paid off. The Falstaff, from a cold parcel of rich Goldridge soils in the Petaluma Gap, is deft and ethereal. It's also still oak-laced and stylish, but the hearty cherry fruit is wonderfully accented with hints of menthol, matcha and oyster mushroom.

2009 Lioco Hirsch Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$60, 13.5%): The minimalist Lioco label found one of the best Hirsch expressions of the vintage. Beautiful but atypically light-footed for this powerful coastal site, there's crazy mineral tension and a heady side, perhaps thanks to the inclusion of some old Mount Eden and Pommard vine selections. Dramatic and full of savory spice and pine-forest depth, with vibrant red fruit and wild blueberry.

2009 Littorai The Haven Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$75, 13.4%): Ted Lemon's first estate parcel, above the Willow Creek watershed outside Occidental just a few miles from the coast, shows an astounding polish - of the sort that makes it an undoubted source for some of the best Pinot Noir on this continent. From a nuanced vintage, this shows a refinement that launches it to the ranks of top Pinot anywhere. A perfect balance of savory - spice from whole grape clusters and dry bark scents - and intense boysenberry and blue fruit. Already completely fulfilling and yet built for 15 years.

2009 Peay Scallop Shelf Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$54, 13.8%): Even as the Peays have expanded their Pinot roster, this 2009 bottling that highlights the savory, mineral side of their Annapolis estate is resplendent. Black tea, moss and perfumed berry notes have a notable delicacy, and the typically deep structure that's a signature of winemaker Vanessa Wong is well-cloaked behind a wall of aromas. Speaking in a quieter voice, this is alluring Pinot for the ages.

2009 Rhys Family Horseshoe Vineyard Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir (\$59, 13.3%): It seems almost academic to discuss Kevin Harvey's transcendent wines, seeing as they vanish immediately upon release. But his 17 1/2-acre site near Skyline Boulevard due west of Cupertino, planted on thin shale-dominant soils, is an astounding mix of 13 selections of Pinot Noir, and in the fine 2009 vintage it made one of the best California Pinots I've ever tasted. A clear grape-stem spice is matched by sandalwood, fig, carob and the most elegant interpretation of forest floor - aromas that seem endless. The texture - silken tannin and a perfect integration of warm berry fruit - is the other half of a magnificent equation.

2009 Sequana Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Noir (\$32; 13.9%) After three vintages, James MacPhail has found a happy marriage with the Hess Collection, which purchased his namesake label this year. The Sequana wines keep getting more nuanced, including this blend that shows the best of the Salinas Valley's prime Pinot site. A hint of bacon and tobacco leaf aromas mesh with strawberry, cherry and tart rhubarb for an oak-tinged but sinewy style. Though based in Sonoma, MacPhail is setting a benchmark for Santa Lucia.

2008 Skewis Salzgeber-Chan Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$45, 14.5%): Hank and Maggie Skewis have found a beautiful energy in this north-facing Russian River site. The rich oak character thrums, highlighting taut red and black fruit - raspberry, blackcurrant and earth, with warm spice and a mineral edge. It has those Russian River bass tones, but with a great tension that makes it shine.

2009 Soter North Valley Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$30, 13.8%): Tony Soter made his name farther south, with his Carneros-based Etude. But his Oregon project is coming into its own. He and winemaker James Cahill finessed a tricky vintage with a mouthwatering, darker-hued release. Think of black cherry juice tinged with fenugreek and burnt sage.

2009 Von Holt Suacci Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$42, 13.3%): This new San Francisco label founded by former Secret Service agent Chris Von Holt tapped the fine Suacci vineyard for this densely knit effort. Leathery berry fruit, cassis, celery seed and transparent red fruit flavors make it a taut specimen that could use a couple years to unfurl and integrate its oak. A final pine-mushroom note brings all the pieces together.

2009 Winderlea Dundee Hills Vineyards Dundee Hills Pinot Noir (\$38, 14.5%): The parcel once known as the Goldschmidt vineyard, planted in 1974 and owned by an Oregon governor, has come into the hands of Bill Sweat and Donna Morris. Their new label is bringing a polished yet still subtle side to the Willamette, and this blend meshes a creaminess with loam-edged cherry fruit and dried thyme aromas. It's a textural masterpiece, with age-worthy structure that never tastes too tannic.

2009 Zepaltas Suacci Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$45, 13.4%): Though his Russian River Valley and Sonoma Coast appellation bottlings were stellar, Ryan Zepaltas' expression of this top Sebastopol site (for which he also makes wine) was a triumph of aromatic power. A clear spicy note from grape stems mixes with classic pine needle, truffle and dark earth to give profundity to lively black cherry. The structure here is well-robed but ready to give at least a decade of potential.

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CABERNET, MERLOT AND BLENDS

At their best, the 2008 Cabernets from up and down the coast found the quality often lost with that grape: a true sense of place.

While Cab is still subject more than most grapes to the whims of size and ripeness, there's evidently a growing interest in wines that speak just a bit more softly, and can be affordably enjoyed without a special occasion. There's still that drive to make Cabernet into an important, top-dollar wine, but more of those wines are being made with a lighter touch.

While Merlot solo is still in a tough spot, it is finding its way into gorgeous blends that burst with character. For that matter, so is Cabernet Franc, a polarizing grape if ever there was one. It is finding a welcome home in places like Yakima Valley and the Sierra foothills.

2008 Andrew Will Two Blondes Vineyard Yakima Valley Red Wine (\$55, 14.5% alcohol): For all we know about Chris Camarda's access to top Washington vineyards, his younger-vine blend from this site outside Yakima, built around Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon, remains dramatically brilliant. The Two Blondes signature is so clear: sanguine and pimenton-edged, full of cherry fruit, blueberry, leather and bark.

2009 Barnard Griffin Columbia Valley Merlot (\$17, 13.7%): Rob Griffin carries a banner for small, affordable labels, and if Merlot is struggling, he's making a solid case from the Northwest. Hailing from top-notch vineyards like Lonesome Spring Ranch and Conner Lee Vineyard, this offers black tea and plum to accent robust oak, with a pretty lilt to the fruit and raspberry highlights. It's real, honest Merlot.

2008 Buehler Vineyards Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$25, 14.5%): Buehler remains that rare Napa exception - determined to bring a fulfilling wine to the table for under \$40. This \$25 wonder again hails from a mix of 30 percent St. Helena estate fruit and a mix of valley floor offerings. With a burnt-herb complexity, sagebrush and cassis, and a durable, tobacco-edged profile, this has more long-term potential than you'd expect.

2009 Buty Columbia Valley Merlot-Cabernet Franc (\$40, 14.1%): Caleb and Nina Foster give these two polarizing varieties a great name together. Their primary source here is the Conner Lee vineyard along the balmy Wahluke Slope, where Merlot thrives. Packed with fragrant berry and graphite, and paprika and fennel around the edges, this is a seamless and heady expression of what Washington does best.

2008 Cadence Ciel du Cheval Vineyard Red Mountain Red Wine (\$45, 14.4%): Ben Smith and Gaye McNutt continue their run of brilliant Bordeaux-inspired efforts from their tiny Seattle label. Jim Holmes' Ciel du Cheval site always reveals silky tannins, and the high dose of Cabernet Franc in the blend meshes that with a fresh sea-foam note and smokier cumin spice. Warm and packed with bright red and blue fruit, and a deep root-like accent, this will keep getting better over the next decade.

2008 Chappellet Pritchard Hill Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$135, 14.9%): Chappellet's \$48 Signature is again one of Napa's standards, but the profound bottling from the Pritchard Hill estate is one for the ages. This is unapologetically huge, a heady package of dried rose, dust, nutmeg and vibrant, robust black fruit, with a ton of guts, refined sandalwood and eau de vie accents to round it out. One of Napa's finest back in extraordinary form.

2008 Corison Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$70, 13.8%): In a tricky vintage, Cathy

Corison's less-is-more approach is a pleasure to behold. As always, her harvest dates are several weeks before her neighbors', in this case in early September. The classic graphite, sandalwood, green olive and lively cherry and plum fruit keep evolving and deepening, so keep this bottle for a decade or more. Stunningly firm and aromatic.

2008 Dominus Napanook Napa Valley Red Wine (\$59, 14.1%): Dominus has raised the price on its Napanook this year, and maybe that's fair, considering that what had been the Yountville estate's second label is soaring in quality, enough to be considered on its own stellar merits. Impressively fine in its structure, with dark mineral, burnt sage and cassia accents to the savory, rich cassis fruit. There's a maturity to the style of the '08, a sign that it has grown up to be an impressive value as one of Napa's top wines.

2009 Easton Monarch Mine Vineyard Sierra Foothills Cabernet Franc (\$20, 13.5%): If Terre Rouge's Bill Easton is usually more focused on Rhone efforts and Zinfandel, he has tapped into the brilliant potential of Cabernet Franc in the Sierra. This top-notch source in Placer County turns out a wonderfully aromatic bottle that nods to Loire reds but has its own mountainous distinction. Packed with juicy, beetroot-edged blueberry flavors.

2008 Gramercy Cellars Columbia Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$45, 13.9%): Not to dismiss his Rhone-inspired efforts, but Master Sommelier Greg Harrington has nailed the quintessence of Washington Cabernet from a variety of vineyard sources. Polished, oak-tinged and masterful, this is a gorgeous dose of vibrant blue fruit, edged with a bright mineral accent and refined tannins that give it aging power.

2008 Januik Columbia Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$30, 14.4%): Longtime Northwest icon Mike Januik taps some of the top spots in Columbia Valley, including Champoux and Klipsun, for a Cabernet that's stunning for the price. Alluring and graphite-edged, with tea, clove, black olive and heady ripe cherry fruit.

2008 Kapcsandy Family State Lane Vineyard Estate Cuvee Yountville Red (\$150, 14.5%): After a successful career in the Seattle construction business, Lou Kapcsandy happened onto a chance to buy Beringer's noted State Lane vineyard. With help from winemaker Dennis Malbec, he has turned his namesake estate into one of Napa's brightest lights. This Cabernet-dominant blend, with Merlot,

Cab Franc and Petit Verdot, is marked by an absolute harmony - deep tobacco and dark mineral notes, rich cassis and a brighter berry edge, subtle dried-chile accents, coffee and licorice. No shortage of ripeness, but the headily aromatic profile is a new California benchmark. The more Merlot-heavy Endre (\$80, 14.1%) isn't far behind.

2008 Laurel Glen Vineyard Counterpoint Sonoma Mountain Cabernet Sauvignon (\$30, 14.3%): Patrick Campbell's storied Sonoma label traded hands earlier this year, and its younger-drinking Counterpoint is a worthy reminder of what this mountainside Glen Ellen site, with its mix of marine and volcanic soils, has to offer. Robust cinnamon spice and tree bark aromas, with dense, luscious fruit and a firm minerality. The quintessence of Sonoma Cabernet.

2009 Louis Martini Sonoma County Cabernet Sauvignon (\$18, 13.8% alcohol): The Martini label, now owned by Gallo, has maintained stewardship not only of its famous Monte Rosso site but of a great history of Cabernet. This widely produced bottle is again a tribute to large-scale winemaking talent. To find this much Cabernet for the price, with robust cassis and plum fruit, a savory sandalwood accent and firm tannins, is a rarity. Here's a proper nod to California Cabernet's legacy.

2008 Round Pond Estate Rutherford Cabernet Sauvignon (\$50, 14.5%): Winemaker Brian Brown is coming into his own, shining with the potential of this sleeper of a Rutherford property. Restraint isn't in order here; 70 percent new oak is seamlessly eaten by the dense fruit, giving off a dusty, spicy essence of espresso, fresh plum and sweet cassis pervades. The hefty tannic grip gives it a good decade to improve and gain nuance. Muscular Rutherford at its best.

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ZINFANDEL AND OTHER REDS

If you wanted to reignite a love affair with Zinfandel, the nuanced 2009 vintage is the year to do it. The popular sweet style certainly didn't vanish, but this year proved a benchmark in finding Zin with all the hearty fruit and winning savory tones that make the grape a treasure.

Clearly there's a movement under way to allow Zin to once again be both rustic and elegant without

heavy-handed winemaking, or an excess of sweetness or oak.

Beyond Zin, the virtues of field blends are once again holding sway as vintners again believe in the old charms of uniquely Californian reds.

The most unlikely matchups of grape and place are bearing fruit. Gamay in the Sierra foothills? This is the new red reality.

2009 Brown Estate Napa Valley Zinfandel (\$36, 15.4% alcohol): The Brown family is setting a standard for elegant Zinfandel in Napa, specifically from their Chiles Valley property. This latest is again seamless and charming: Cocoa, citrus zest and tree bark accents frame balsam and juicy, deep huckleberry fruit that show full ripeness amid a distinct nuance.

2009 Broc Cellars Vine Starr California Red (\$25, 13.5%): Chris Brockway's version of California table wine is a tribute to the lighter step of Sonoma Zinfandel, with a small dose of Bennett Valley Syrah. Intensely spiced and vivacious, with cardamom, black mustard and black pepper, and fresh raspberry fruit. Nuanced, compelling and a perfect template for great, straightforward table wine.

2009 Bucklin Bambino Old Hill Ranch Sonoma Valley Zinfandel (\$24, 15.2%): The Bucklin family controls Kenwood's Old Hill, arguably Sonoma's oldest vineyard, and this younger-vine (1998) bottle uses the same field-blend principle (Petite Sirah, Alicante Bouschet, Grenache and so on) for a pitch-perfect Zin combo of bramble fruit and dark pepper spice, with raspberry jam, licorice and bay leaf. If not showing the full age of old vines, the Bambino still frames the beauty of a great site.

2008 Dashe Cellars Florence Vineyard Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel (\$32): Mike Dashe favors this riverbed site for a softer, pure expression of Dry Creek's valley floor. Hearty plum, cinnamon, cherry skin and a mineral cut form a juicy, full expression with potential to improve over the next five years.

2009 Edmunds St. John Bone-Jolly El Dorado County Gamay Noir (\$17 12.3%): Berkeley's Steve Edmunds has long been the defender of California Gamay, and after many years his work is paying off as new plantings appear in the Sierra. Primarily from the Witters vineyard near Camino,

this is a tribute to the nuance that comes with altitude. Pleasingly rooty and huckleberry-powered, with lots of loamy spice.

NV Marietta Cellars Old Vine Red (\$11): Geyserville-based Chris Bilbro and his sons uphold a simple, if rare, prospect - that wine should be good, simple and affordable without being bland. Their Zinfandel-based blend, usually from Sonoma and Mendocino sources, is always released in nonvintage lot numbers (currently No. 56), with a dark berry profile accented by dry herb and dust. With some Italian varieties typically in the blend, it brims with friendly, soft fruit. If it's not built for the long term, its honest, ripe flavors should be a template for California affordability.

2008 McCay Cellars Paisley Lodi Red (\$24, 14.8%): Michael McCay is bringing nuance back to Lodi reds with this blend of Zin and Petite Sirah. The great bramble and dust of Zin, with a bit of balsam to enliven the dense black fruit. Robust and powerful but still retaining a subtlety that reminds you of what Lodi can do so well.

2009 Ridge Lytton Springs Dry Creek Valley Red (\$35, 14.5%): Under the hand of winemaker John Olney, the latest Lytton Springs is a gorgeous high-wire act, the best in years. Heady and full of dried flowers, dusty plum and India ink, it brings a stunning freshness to its berry fruit, with a firm tannic backbone thanks to 23 percent Petite Sirah.

2010 Rock Wall Super Alamedan California Red (\$20, 13.5%): You can take Kent Rosenblum out of his old winery, but you can't take him out of Alameda. He's expanded beyond Zin for a blend that also includes Sangiovese and Montepulciano from Contra Costa vines, plus a bit of Cabernet. The result diverges from his hammerhead Zins with a gorgeously deft profile, showing spicy berry, dried tomato leaf, black pepper and plum skin in a buoyant, grippy package just made for the table. As fine a tribute to the Island City as you could want.

2008 Tres Sabores Rutherford Zinfandel (\$35, 13.8%): Julie Johnson has staked a claim for subtle, lower-impact Zin from her Rutherford vineyard. Its clean lines are defined by a raft of boysenberry and bright cherry fruit, plus candied-violet aromas, a hint of musk and a savory mineral edge.

The top vintners not at top dollar

Because some of our Top 100 Wines are in limited supply, here's a list of other bottles made by some of our Top 100 producers, all \$40 or less:

- 2010** The Beast (Buty) Wallula Vineyard Columbia Valley Riesling (\$25)
- 2010** Bokisch Terra Alta Clements Hills Albarino (\$16)
- 2010** Buty Columbia Valley Semillon-Sauvignon-Muscadelle (\$25)
- 2009** Cadence Coda Columbia Valley Red (\$25)
- 2010** Calera Central Coast Chardonnay (\$18)
- 2010** Dashe Les Enfants Terribles Dry Creek Valley Grenache (\$24)
- 2010** Donkey & Goat El Dorado Grenache Noir (\$27)
- 2009** Evening Land Vineyards Blue Label Oregon Pinot Noir (\$24)
- NV** Gloria Ferrer Blanc de Noirs (\$20)
- 2009** Hanzell Sebella Sonoma Valley Chardonnay (\$36)
- 2009** Hirsch Bohan-Dillon Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$30)
- 2010** Lioco Sonoma County Chardonnay (\$20)
- 2010** Littorai Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$35)
- 2009** Ridge Three Valleys Sonoma County Red (\$24)
- NV** Roederer Estate Anderson Valley Brut (\$26)
- 2009** Round Pond Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$30)
- 2009** Stoller JV Estate Dundee Hills Pinot Noir (\$25)
- 2010** Tablas Creek Patelin de Tablas Paso Robles Red (\$20)
- 2010** Wind Gap Fannuchi-Wood Road Vineyard Russian River Valley Trousseau Gris (\$21)
- 2009** Zepaltas Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$29)

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