

Top Of The World:
**TEN OF THE
 100
 BEST**

By **LAURA NESS**

Each year, more than 15,000 wines from around the world are presented, blind, to *Wine & Spirits* magazine tasting panels and critics in search of the most distinctive wines. Wineries that receive the highest scores over a range of wines are considered for the Top 100 list that the magazine has published yearly since 1988. Ten California wineries are among that exclusive pantheon for 2021—several of which are returning for encore applause multiple times. Consistency of excellence guarantees many of these well-established and well-loved institutions a place at the top. But there are always new arrivals on the list to keep things fresh and interesting. Here are 10 of those wineries, all from California, and all gift-worthy for the season.

Bottle Photos: Annarose Monroe Photography



2018 ASHES & DIAMONDS WINERY MOUNTAIN CUVÉE NO. 3, BATES RANCH VINEYARD, SANTA CRUZ MOUNTAINS

From a highly desirable vineyard 2,100 feet above sea level, planted in 1972 at the edge of the Santa Cruz Mountains AVA, comes this explosive blend of Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon, crafted with a decidedly French touch, and American oak. Winemaker Diana Snowden Seysses hails from Napa but married the heir to Burgundy's Domaine Dujac dynasty. Graphite, tobacco, cedar and mountain spice underpin this astonishing rampart of a wine. Aromas of a summer thunderstorm conjure up a cloud-enshrouded El Capitan or a massive Sequoia. Wild blackberries and dark cherries flood the palate with silky, grippy tannins, flowing like chocolate lava and driven by plentiful acid. Roasted poblano and hatch chiles pack a savory, powerful punch on the fabulous finish. Owner Kashy Khaledi (son of winery owner Darioush Khaledi), named the winery after the stark 1945 Polish war film he says literally left him ravaged.

13.6% | \$105



2019 AU BON CLIMAT CHARDONNAY, LOS ALAMOS VINEYARD, SANTA BARBARA

When Jim Clendenen, a giant in the wine industry, passed away earlier this year, it was a huge loss. Best known for promoting Santa Barbara County Chardonnay and Pinot Noir for their freshness and nuanced layers, his sense of humor was as hearty and endearing as his wine. This sun-kissed Chardonnay is no exception, with its medium-bodied core of ripe nectarines, toasted cashews, tangerine and tangelo, with a lacquer of lime pith, roasted marshmallow and coconut. It's rare to find a single vineyard Chardonnay at this price, especially given its many delightful layers, spritely acidity, lush texture and clean finish. The aromatics are pure peach melba, buttery shortbread and cinnamon and nutmeg. *Wine & Spirits* magazine declared it a Best Buy, and awarded it 92 points.

13.5% | \$25



2018 BIG BASIN VINEYARDS OLD CORRAL ESTATE PINOT NOIR, SANTA CRUZ MOUNTAINS

Bradley Brown, founder and proprietor of Big Basin Vineyards, was ecstatic the first time he made the Top 100 in 2008. He repeated the honor in 2018 and again in 2021. We love the Old Corral estate Pinot Noir, from vines that used to be Syrah. For the most part, these vines escaped damage from the CZU fires of 2020, although it's not clear how or why they were spared. The clones are Mt. Eden and Swan and their autumnal aromas of roasted chestnuts, cherry, pomegranate and red apples are beguiling. Muscular yet explosive, like Simone Biles doing a floor show all over your palate, this wine sends telegrams of raspberry, cedar and red currant to every part of your brain. Winemaker Blake Yarger takes a pretty consistent approach to all his Pinots, using 100 percent whole-cluster, indigenous yeast fermentations, with no additions of any kind—just pure fruit.

13.1% | \$65



2017 CALERA PINOT NOIR, MT. HARLAN REED VINEYARD, CENTRAL COAST

Always a paragon of impeccable prowess and dizzying depth, Calera's Pinot Noirs have been in their own league since Josh Jensen first planted vines in pure limestone in San Benito County in the 1970s. Winemaker Mike Waller carries out the tradition of crafting distinctive expressions from each of the very different blocks on Mt. Harlan, its own AVA. The 2017 Reed Vineyard bottling cannot be touched for its complete orchestral approach to an elegant, full-throttle Pinot Noir. With its fabulous texture and flawless pace, it pulses across your palate with a crescendo of flavors from dried apples, cranberries, golden raisins, and baking spice to roasted poblano chiles and olives. You can smell the desiccated hillside from whence it came, all dried blackberries, autumn leaves and pipe tobacco. 95 points from *Wine & Spirits*.

14.4% | \$75



2018 DIAMOND CREEK VINEYARDS VOLCANIC HILL CABERNET SAUVIGNON, NAPA VALLEY

Al and Boots Brounstein embodied their 20-acre vineyard on Diamond Mountain planted in the 1960s: generous, warm, engaging, and spirited. When I last saw Boots, who passed away in 2019, at a big Cabernet tasting, her smile was as warm as her dark-fruited wines, and all four of them greatly impressed. I was taken by the cool composure of the Gravelly Meadow, but Volcanic Hill, with its gray ashy soil courtesy of Mt. Konociti's eruption 8 million years ago, reigns as the most savory and powerful of the Diamond Creek wines. Seething with underlying currents of cassis and graphite from the Petit Verdot, you can taste its subterranean origins. The sunny, warm, south-facing microclimate yields ripe, almost monolithic black fruit, powdery ash-like tannins, and a smoky aura: a snapshot of geological history, and a love letter to a couple's devotion to a piece of land.

14.5% | \$275



2019 HIRSCH VINEYARDS ESTATE CHARDONNAY

This Chardonnay comes from a steep hillside first planted from cuttings provided by Joe Rochioli in 1994, above founder David Hirsch's house. Enamored with Barolo, Hirsch had intended to plant Nebbiolo, but fortunately, Burt Williams, of Williams Selyem, who had been buying his Pinot Noir fruit, explained that it might be more prudent to plant Chardonnay instead. Selyem went on to make Chardonnay from here from 1997 to 2000; and Kistler Vineyards took the fruit through 2005. Aromas of wildflowers, toasted almonds, graham crackers, butterscotch candy and Key lime pie lead to a citrus core of broiled grapefruit, lime pith, preserved lemon and grilled pineapple. A saline element on the mid-palate melds nicely with the Winesap apple fritter finish, where you might notice a nutty flourish from the 27 percent new French and Austrian oak.

12.8% | \$60



2013 IRON HORSE VINEYARDS LATE DISGORGED SPARKLING BRUT, SONOMA

Iron Horse is at the top of our list of favorite houses of sparkling for their fervent support of environmental causes—they donate \$4 for each bottle of Ocean Reserve sold to *National Geographic's* Ocean Initiative. We can drink to that. And now, here's another reason to join their wine club: something that belongs atop of your "gifts to self" list. This late disgorged Brut, born in 2013 and disgorged in 2020, eloquently demonstrates the benefits of beauty sleep. Seven years of serene slumber concentrated its sleek inner core, compressed the bubbles into microscopic buzz bombs and gave lift to its wonderfully fresh bread-dough aromatics, wound around Mandarin and Cara Cara orange marmalade. Explosive flavors of golden apple strudel do this true *Tête de Cuvée* proud. The fashionable way to be late this holiday season.

13.5% | \$125



2018 MOUNT EDEN VINEYARDS ESTATE CHARDONNAY, SANTA CRUZ MOUNTAINS

Winemaker Jeffrey Patterson was thrilled to receive a Top 100 Wineries of the World award once again this year. His barrel-fermented estate Chardonnays, done in 50 percent new French oak, typically exhibit that classic combination of orchard fruit with a lemon cream filling, buttery shortbread, and perfectly baked pie crust. This one is even a bit more expansive in the nose, with kaffir lime, sandalwood, salted caramel and honeycomb, but is distinctly driven by Gravenstein and golden apples, quince and toasted walnut strudel on the palate, complete with cinnamon and brown sugar. Touches of mandarin and marzipan round out the warmth and abundance, with a finish of churros. There's an engaging generosity to this wine that makes it ideal for gifting. Anyone who appreciates Chardonnay will find something to fancy here.

13.5% | \$60



2018 RADIO-COTEAU PINOT NOIR, BELAY ESTATE, SONOMA COAST

From a French colloquial expression meaning "word of mouth," (literally translates to "broadcasting from the hillside"), Radio-Coteau echoes the French winemaking roots of New York native Eric Sussman, who worked harvests in 1995 in Bordeaux and 1996 in Burgundy after graduating from Cornell. Returning to the U.S., he did stints at Bonny Doon and Dehlinger, founding Radio-Coteau in 2002. The Demeter-certified Biodynamic® Belay Vineyard above Occidental is planted to Calera, Mount Eden and Burgundy clones of Pinot Noir. Brimming with bright raspberry tea, Asian five spice and cardamom, this riveting, intense, expressive wine broadcasts its proximity to the sea with briny salinity and wild fennel. No static at all. The tannins are like polished pebbles on the seashore. This is the eighth time R-C has been named to the Top 100.

13% | \$80



2017 RIDGE VINEYARDS MONTE BELLO ESTATE, SANTA CRUZ MOUNTAINS

Among winemaker Eric Baugher's favorites is this 2017 Monte Bello, a true epitome of his talent. Making wine from this toasty, dry site takes wine craft, and for 20 years, he has demonstrated his mettle. Each year, the blend for the mighty Monte Bello, the flagship of the Cupertino castle on the hill, changes with the winemaker's desire to best express the vintage. For 2017, Cabernet Sauvignon was mightily dominant, and Franc took a back seat, with the blend being 73 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 15 percent Merlot, 8 percent Petit Verdot and 4 percent Cabernet Franc. Opulent blackberry and licorice star in this blockbuster that speaks fluently of barrel influence. Great acid and immense complexity give it a finish like overtime in football. With 100 points from Jeb Dunnuck, and 98 points from *Wine & Spirits*, this is a keeper.

13.7% | Sold Out