

Make Room in Your Cellar for California Red Blends

Home to many reputable single-vineyard bottlings, California's red blends are starting to take center stage. Here are our editors' recommendations.

BY VIRGINIE BOONE, JIM GORDON AND MATT KETTMANN - November 5, 2018

In California, blends are both a blessing and a curse. The state is blessed to be able to grow a wide variety of grapes, and there are no legal or bureaucratic restrictions on doing so.

But of course, just because you can do something doesn't mean you should. As such, California offers blended wines at every quality and price level. Some are life-changing and revelatory, while others wither and lack character.

In a land planted to its fair majority of hearty reds, from Cabernet Sauvignon to Zinfandel, the grapes are ripe, structured and primed for cellaring, in standalone or blended form. But when partnered with the right companions, they can strike a harmonious tone of lush fruit and bold tannins that can unfurl and evolve slowly over time.

California also pays homage to a historic lineage of old blends. Many of the old vineyards used to source these bottlings were planted by Italian immigrants before Prohibition. They're often rooted in Zinfandel and Petite Sirah, but they also can contain other lesser-known varieties, like Carignan and Mondeuse.

Elsewhere, Bordeaux-style or Cabernet Sauvignon-based blends are the standard. Many regions are rich in ripe Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot grapes, though Rhône and Mediterranean-inspired blends abound, too.

If diversity is what you seek in your cellar, California's top red blends are for you. —Virginie Boone



From left to right; Larkmead 2015 Salon (Napa Valley), Brutocao 2014 Coro Mendocino Red Blend and Epoch 2014 Ingenuity (Paso Robles Willow Creek District) / Photo by Jens Johnson

Napa Valley Blends

In 1974, a Midwest-born construction entrepreneur and his German winemaker sent a lightning bolt through the Napa Valley with the first vintage of a red blend they came to call Insignia. It was made from Cabernet Sauvignon grown in the Stags Leap District, with 6% Merlot.

Joseph Phelps Vineyards' Insignia has become one of Napa Valley's standard bearers and an inspiration to producers of fine blends everywhere. From the beginning, Phelps was making a statement.



From left to right; Alpha Omega 2013 Proprietary Red (Napa Valley), Anderson Conn Valley 2015 Aurum (Napa Valley), Larkmead 2015 Salon (Napa Valley) and Joseph Phelps 2014 Insignia Estate Grown Red (Napa Valley) / Photo by Jens Johnson

“The proprietary name was selected to represent the best lots available for each vintage, and to emphasize the importance of blending over varietal designation as a determinant of quality,” said Phelps at University of California, Berkeley, in 1996. (He passed away in 2015.)

At the time Phelps launched Insignia, many of the region's wineries were focused on varietal wines. This lauded blend was a good way to educate American consumers and encourage them to move away from sweet, high-octane wines like Ripple.

Phelps was inspired by Bordeaux's marquee blended wines like Châteaux Latour, Mouton-Rothschild and Haut-Brion. However, he didn't own any grapes of his own at the time, so he had to be flexible. His winemaker, Walter Schug, just tried to make the best wine he could every year from the best grapes they could buy.

Some 40 years later, Ashley Hepworth, Joseph Phelps' current winemaker, has a lot more with which to work. The winery owns several estate vineyards, where she's able to pull the best lots each year. Insignia became a 100% estate-grown wine in 2004.

“Blending is the craft of winemaking, for sure,” says Hepworth. “Insignia is a work in progress throughout the year.”

Hepworth keeps the varieties separate after harvest, when she chooses between Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Malbec and Petit Verdot, though not all are represented in every vintage. She starts blending the following March, not really thinking about the wine's ultimate composition until the end.

“It is important to let the vintage speak, but I'm a little draconian about what goes into Insignia,” says Hepworth. “If a wine is not O.K. on its own, it's not going to be O.K. in the blend.”

The Napa Valley is now as famous for its Bordeaux-style blends as for signature single-vineyard Cabernet Sauvignons.

Opus One is Robert Mondavi's contribution to the genre, originally in partnership with Baron Philippe de Rothschild. Inglenook released the first Rubicon in 1978, a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Cabernet Franc. Then came other proprietary reds from producers like Pahlmeyer, Beaulieu Vineyard, Cain, Dominus, Ramey, Dalla Valle and **Alpha Omega**.

“Napa is amazing for the diversity of terroir in a small region with 123 soil variations,” says Jean Hoefliger, winemaker for Alpha Omega. “In addition to that diversity, we have different varieties.

“When you do a Bordeaux blend with that many components to pick from, you have to add complexity and depth. If you do a Cabernet, it is a very masculine-framed variety. If you can add to that a feminine Merlot, a soul-searcher Cab Franc and superhero like Petit Verdot, you can fill the wine’s gaps and add layers of complexity. Blends are an expression of the greatness of Napa Valley.” —V.B.

Alpha Omega 2013 Proprietary Red (Napa Valley); \$100, 98 points. This blends 61% Cabernet Sauvignon, 32% Merlot and 7% Cabernet Franc into a seamless expression of black pepper, garrigue, clove and pencil. Old world in style and in full command of its power, it offers generously layered, intensely robust tannin and concentration that flirts with richness. Half barrel-fermented and half stainless-steel, it shows promise for cellaring; enjoy best 2023–2038. **Cellar Selection.** —V.B.

Larkmead 2015 Salon (Napa Valley); \$200, 98 points. A blend of 60% Cabernet Sauvignon and 40% Cabernet Franc, this is a tremendous wine, offering grippy red-currant, tobacco and graphite components around a full-bodied core of weight and breadth. Powerful yet elegant, it retains and celebrates much of the Cab Franc character in its unabashed embrace of dried herb, clove and violet. Enjoy 2025–2030. —V.B.

Anderson Conn Valley 2015 Aurum (Napa Valley); \$395, 97 points. Aurum, Latin for gold, is the first release of this high-level, small-production wine—a blend of 83% Cabernet Sauvignon, 9% Petit Verdot, 7% Cabernet Franc and 1% Merlot. Spicy clove, black pepper and cigar box highlight a grippy, structured and expansive palate of blackberry and cherry. It’s eager for more time in the cellar; enjoy 2025–2035. **Cellar Selection.** —V.B.

Joseph Phelps 2014 Insignia Estate Grown Red (Napa Valley); \$250, 96 points. This fine vintage of Insignia combines 87% Cabernet Sauvignon with 9% Petit Verdot, 2% Malbec and 2% Cabernet Franc. Soft, supple and seamless, it offers rich but balanced cassis and milk chocolate flavors, with supportive and complementary oak. It should do well in the cellar and will be best from 2024–2034. **Cellar Selection.** —V.B.

Shafer 2015 TD-9 (Napa Valley); \$60, 94 points. This is a new offering from the producer, sparked by winemaker Elias Fernandez’s desire to make a Merlot-based blend, rather than a varietal Merlot. It is an estate-grown blend of 56% Merlot, 28% Cabernet Sauvignon and 16% Malbec. Rich and concentrated, it’s delightfully robust and vibrant, offering a mix of blackberry, blueberry and caramel chocolate flavors that finish in soft, integrated oak. **Editors’ Choice.** —V.B.