

# Wine Spectator online

## Black Sheep Vintage

*California's 1998 Cabernets Are Tough, Tannic and Expensive*

By [James Laube](#)

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Without a doubt, the 1998 vintage of California Cabernet Sauvignon is the most difficult group of young wines I've tasted in more than a decade. Because so many vineyards struggled to ripen in 1998, and the resulting wines generally lack the rich core of plush fruit flavors usually evident in young California Cabernets, this vintage is the black sheep in an otherwise spectacular decade of Cabernet vintages. Perhaps with time, the 1998 wines will prove to be late bloomers and live up to some winemakers' claims that this vintage is a worthy successor to 1997.

But at this point, with many of its bottlings showing pronounced herbal and leathery flavors and dry, chewy tannins, 1998 comes across as an about-face from the ripe and opulent style of the 1997 vintage. I give the vintage 86 points on Wine Spectator's 100-point scale, meaning it is of very good quality.

To be fair, 1998 is far from a disaster; many winemakers succeeded in making the best of this wickedly uneven year. Still, the style of the wines is in many instances the antithesis of what most of the vintages of the '90s provided—Cabernets with dark colors, ripe, complex flavors and supple, well-integrated tannins. Many 1998s have good but not exceptional colors and are showing reddish hues. Flavor-wise, they offer sage, herb, olive, bell pepper and tobacco, with less of the usual vibrant ripe plum, currant and black cherry fruit, and they finish with stubborn, grainy tannins.

And there are serious questions about how these high-acid, tough-edged wines will evolve with age. The 1998 vintage in California has proved to be problematic across the board—from Chardonnay to Pinot Noir to Sauvignon Blanc to Zinfandel—with wines that have a narrow range of flavors, high acidity and, among the reds, crisp, firm tannins. There is the prospect that these tight, angular wines will turn drier with time.

On top of all this, prices for 1998s are steep—in many instances higher than those for the superior 1997s on release. Paying top dollar for a curious vintage is a high-stakes proposition. If the wines weren't so costly, it would be a lot easier to get excited about them.

"1997 was the big easy, '98 the little hard," said Jeff Hinchliffe, winemaker for Hanna Winery in Sonoma, who thinks 1998 may end up superior to 1997. Added Dean Sylvester, winemaker at Whitehall Lane in Napa Valley, "1998 produced fruit with thick skins that resulted in firm tannins, and grapes that lacked the superintense flavors that we have become accustomed to—or spoiled by."

"There are aspects of the 1998 Cabernets that I actually like better than the 1997s," said Steve Test of Merryvale in Napa Valley, pointing to his wines' milder, less astringent tannins. But, he adds, the 1998s are not as concentrated as the 1997s or 1999s. Indeed, so far, many of the top wines in 1998 have shown themselves to be a notch or two below their 1997 versions, and some 1998s truly pale by comparison.

The stars of the 1998 vintage hail mainly from Napa Valley and sites where the grapes obviously ripened evenly. Wines such as the 1998 Viader (95 points, \$65), Dalla Valle Maya (93, \$125), Joseph Phelps Insignia (93, \$120), Pride Mountain Vineyard (93, \$46), Harlan (92, \$175), Pahlmeyer (92, \$90) or Screaming Eagle (92, \$250) show the ripeness and complexities that could be achieved. Yet all of these wines rate lower than their 1997 editions—and they show glimpses of the drying tannins that are much more evident in the vast majority of the wines.

The 1998 vintage proved challenging for winemakers and grapegrowers alike. Because of the unusually wet, cool spring, the grapes set late and unevenly—in some areas the grape set spanned a six-week period—and ripened irregularly. Winemakers said they heavily thinned an already small crop by removing immature grape clusters at veraison (when the grapes start to turn from green to red). Heat waves in July and August caused serious sunburn to the grapes, made worse by the fact that many grapevines are trained to expose their grapes to the sun.

The weather turned favorable in September, but it was too late for many vineyards to catch up and ripen. Then rains hit in October; the ground remained wet and cold, vines dropped their leaves and ripening ceased. Some wineries picked into November, though with spotty results.

Tim Mondavi, winemaker at Robert Mondavi Winery, said he was surprised by the level of damage caused by the sunburn and believes it contributed to a strong leathery flavor in many wines. Scott McLeod of Niebaum-Coppola in Napa said his vines in Rutherford had a tough time coping with the heat. He finally decided that quality in 1998 didn't merit a bottling of the winery's premier Cabernet blend, Rubicon.

Several other wineries, including Dominus and Caymus, toyed with the idea of not releasing a 1998 before finally deciding they liked the quality of their wines. But Flora Springs (Reserve), Cosentino "Coz" and Reserve, Phelps Backus and Fisher's Lamb and Wedding vineyards were declassified; Chateau St. Jean didn't make a Sonoma County Reserve for the first time in history. St. Jean winemaker Steve Reeder said he used less new oak for the '98 Cinq Cépages, a Bordeaux-style blend made from Sonoma grapes, because the wine lacked the richness of the previous four vintages. At Atalon, the new Kendall-Jackson label in Napa, the winery kept only 38 percent of its production, selling off the remainder as bulk wine.

Coming after the sensational 1997 vintage, which produced plush, opulent and deeply concentrated wines in spades, shopping for 1998s requires far more patience. For many well-stocked Cabernet lovers who've been buying throughout the decade, 1998 may be the time to take a breather and wait for next year. If you're determined to buy 1998s, perhaps to keep vertical collections intact or to commemorate special occasions, shop carefully. For one thing, there are far fewer outstanding wines to buy; the percentage of outstanding Cabernets is the lowest since 1988 and 1989. So far, a little more than 11 percent of the '98s have scored outstanding; in '97, that figure was 43 percent. The other factor is price. You'll find many '98s selling for \$60 to \$150 that didn't earn outstanding scores, including Bryant Family Vineyard (89, \$150), Opus One (88, \$150) and Cardinale (88, \$125).

Instead, look to one of the many excellent 1997s that are still available. Because '97 produced a record-size crop, production for many wineries was a third larger than normal. A few excellent 1997s, such as Fisher Sonoma County Coach Insignia (92, \$30), Rutherford Grove Napa Valley (92, \$28) and Conn Creek Limited Release (91, \$25), are attractively priced, as well. (See the profiles beginning on page 55 for more information on Fisher's wines, plus those of two other new Napa Cabernet producers: Schrader and Hourglass.)

The 1999 vintage could well be among the top three vintages of the decade—comparable to 1994 and 1997 in overall quality, featuring rich, complex flavors, depth and concentration. They'll be the kinds of wines that you can expect to age well for a decade or more. However, 1999 will also be expensive because it's an unusually small crop and most winemakers believe it will be far superior to 1998. Many vintners are hesitant to emphasize either point, knowing that they still have 1998s to sell amid the slowing U.S. economy and the strong demand for the 2000 Bordeaux vintage.

Despite the tough conditions in 1998, California continued to bloom with exciting new wines produced in small quantities by adventurous producers. Some may stand the test of time, others will prove transitory. What follows is my list of some new and notable wines from the 1998 vintage that you should keep an eye out for.

Richard Partridge Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1998 (94 points, \$55, 500 cases) is dark, rich and chocolaty, with focused black fruit flavors and a long finish. This debut winery—a partnership between Richard Partridge, an electrical engineer who dreamed of having his own winery, and Bob Egelhoff, who is

the current winemaker at David Arthur and whose previous projects include Pahlmeyer, Merryvale and Robert Craig—is one to watch. Partridge and Egelhoff don't have the luxury of owning their own vineyards, and a tricky vintage such as 1998 makes finding good grape sources extra tough. Luckily, Egelhoff was able to secure grapes from Rutherford's Sacrasché Vineyard, Snowden Vineyard and the Stags Leap District's Steltzner Vineyard.

Carter Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Coliseum Block 1998 (90, \$50, 150 cases) is massive and broad-shouldered, a bright mix of juicy fruit and mouthpuckering tannins. This wonder, made by Nils Venge, is his one and only wine from the Coliseum Block Vineyard on Soda Canyon Road in Napa Valley. When the price of grapes doubled after the 1998 vintage, Venge decided it would be best to switch vineyard sources, and subsequent vintages will come from another vineyard, which is managed by Andy Beckstoffer. Venge's success with Saddleback Cellars and his own Venge label make this a winery with potential.

Vérité La Joie Sonoma-Napa Counties 1998 (90, \$120, 1,859 cases) is a tasty combination of supple texture and chewy tannins, with mocha, currant and vanilla flavors. A chance meeting of Kendall-Jackson owners Jess Jackson and Barbara Banke with Bordeaux winemaker Pierre Seillan resulted in Seillan moving to California to head up the latest Jackson Family Farms wine venture, Vérité. Hoping to combine the classic approach of French winemaking with ripe California grapes, Vérité La Joie Sonoma-Napa Counties 1998—showing Seillan's Bordeaux roots—is a blend of 70 percent Cabernet Sauvignon and 30 percent Merlot, from four different vineyards in Sonoma and Carneros.

Showket Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville 1998 (89, \$69, 1,150 cases) is a ripe and harmonious effort, with juicy, spicy currant, plum and wild berry flavors. Kal and Dorothy Showket bought a 26-acre Oakville vineyard in 1987 and started selling grapes to the reputable Caymus, Shafer, Dalla Valle and Merryvale wineries. When the Showkets decided to keep the grapes and make their own wine, they enlisted the services of winemaker Heidi Peterson Barrett, who was already familiar with the Showket Cabernet Franc she had used during her tenure working at Dalla Valle. The Showkets also make a Napa Valley Sangiovese.

Vinoce Mount Veeder 1998 (88, \$60, 190 cases) is a rich and distinctive wine, with very ripe and juicy plum and black cherry flavors. Brian Nuss, owner and winemaker of Vinoce Vineyards, traces his love affair with Mount Veeder wines to a stint working in the vineyard owned by comedian and actor Robin Williams in the 1990s. Nuss was managing Williams' PymRae property when it was being designed for vineyards. Later, Nuss purchased 40 acres of PymRae for himself, planting 25 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot. At first Nuss sold his grapes, but after taking winemaking courses, he felt he was ready to try his hand at winemaking—and at managing Mount Veeder's tannins. The Vinoce Mount Veeder 1998 is a blend of 54 percent Cabernet Franc, 28 percent Merlot and 18 percent Cabernet Sauvignon.

Juslyn Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Vineyard Select 1998 (87, \$75, 720 cases) is ripe, with juicy plum and berry flavors and notes of espresso, cedar and tobacco. Owners Perry and Carolyn Butler came to the United States from England in 1982. In 1986, they founded the computer company Global Dynamics, then sold the business and purchased 55 acres on Spring Mountain. The Butlers planted 8 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon, Petit Verdot, Cabernet Franc and Merlot, which will be used in an estate bottling starting with the 2000 vintage. For the 1998 vintage, winemaker Craig Maclean used grapes grown by Andy Beckstoffer—Cabernet from Oakville and Merlot from Yountville.

Senior editor James Laube is Wine Spectator's California expert. MaryAnn Worobiec contributed to this report.

James Laube's Smart Buys in California Cabernet

Kendall-Jackson Cabernet Sauvignon Alexander Valley Great Estates 1997 92 \$40 Very rich and full-bodied, with plush tannins around a core of earthy currant, toasty oak, hints of sage, chocolate and rich black cherry. Focused, elegant and long finish.

Conn Creek Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Limited Release 1997 91 \$25 Solid tannins underscore ripe

black currant, mocha and herbal notes that linger on the firm, layered finish.

Franciscan Oakville Estate Magnificat Napa Valley 1997 91 \$35 Smooth and seductive blend, with pretty toasty oak, spice, currant and black cherry. Mocha, raspberry and cinnamon on the finish, with plush tannins. Great length.

The Hess Collection Cabernet Sauvignon Mount Veeder 1997 90 \$35 Exuberant and robust, with chunky, chewy, grapey currant, black cherry and blackberry flavors. Firm tannins.

Crocker & Starr Stone Place Cuvée Napa Valley 1997 89 \$36 Smooth and rich, with tobacco, currant and blackberry, and sage and cedar hints. Firm tannins. Could cellar short-term.

Gallo of Sonoma Cabernet Sauvignon Alexander Valley Barrelli Creek Vineyard 1997 89 \$28 Very distinctive, with rich anise-scented black cherry, currant, wild berry and sage. Firm, somewhat tannic finish.

Marcelina Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1997 89 \$22 Earthy, rustic and tannic, with beefy currant, leather, anise, mineral and sage combining to give it depth and complexity.

Whitehall Lane Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1998 89 \$32 Harmonious and well-balanced anise, cedar, currant, mocha and mineral flavors, finishing with intensity and complexity.

Beaulieu Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon Rutherford 1998 88 \$22 Smooth and integrated, with supple coffee, currant, black cherry, cedar, herb and anise, finishing with depth.

Heitz Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1997 88 \$32 Earthy currant, anise, cedar, plum and tarry flavors are rich and concentrated. Muscular, turning tight and tannic.

Merryvale Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1998 88 \$25 Serves up a tasty band of earthy berry and cherry-laced fruit, finishing with fresh leather, anise and blackberry notes.

Mount Veeder Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1997 88 \$35 Dark, dense and chewy, with currant, coffee, mocha and lead pencil flavors, and a rich aftertaste.

Trefethen Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1998 88 \$30 Pleasantly balanced, with ripe cherry, currant and berryish fruit, a nice touch of cedary oak and good tannins.

Beaulieu Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1998 87 \$17 Shows harmony and grace, with cola, cherry, plum and dill-laced oak. Lots of flavor and character for the vintage.

Fetzer Cabernet Sauvignon North Coast Barrel Select 1997 87 \$17 Mellow and round, with black currant, herbal and well-integrated oak tones that finish with ripe tannins.

James Laube's Best-Value California Cabernets E

chelon Cabernet Sauvignon California 1999 87 \$15 Round and grapey, with ripe black cherry, currant and cocoa, framed by mocha notes and modest tannins.

Indigo Hills Cabernet Sauvignon North Coast 1997 87 \$13 Violet, underbrush and blackberry flavors firm up on the finish. Not fleshy, but flavors have good focus.

Bonterra Cabernet Sauvignon North Coast 1997 86 \$15 Firmly tannic. Ripe black currant, blackberry and mocha flavors have good depth and carry through the finish.

Foppiano Cabernet Sauvignon Russian River Valley 1999 86 \$15 Chewy, chunky blackberry, herb and

currant flavors have plenty of firm tannins wrapped within toasty oak nuances.

Kendall-Jackson Cabernet Sauvignon-Shiraz California Collage 2000 86 \$9 Lively and intense, with black cherry, plum and currant nuances, highlighted by round tannins and caramel oak tones.

Farallon Cabernet Sauvignon North Coast 1998 85 \$13 Starts with soft plum, black currant, earth and cherry notes, then picks up herbal tones and modest tannins.

Gallo of Sonoma Cabernet Sauvignon Sonoma County 1998 85 \$13 Well-balanced, with blackberry, herb, earth and currant flavors, and firm, focused tannins.

J. Lohr Cabernet Sauvignon Paso Robles Seven Oaks 1998 85 \$15 Raisin, plum and cherry notes have good depth and are framed by a ripe, tannic structure.

St. Francis Cabernet Sauvignon Sonoma County California Selection 1999 85 \$15 Strong mint and bay leaf flavors pick up good depth to moderately tannic plum, currant and spicy oak flavors.

Taft Street Cabernet Sauvignon Sonoma County 1998 85 \$15 Plum, black currant and lingering herbal flavors are framed by a firm, tannic structure and toasty oak.

Farallon Cabernet Sauvignon Central Coast 1998 84 \$13 Raspberry, cocoa and currant jam flavors have a slightly vinegary, acid lift. Finishes with toasty oak, modest tannins.

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