Last week, we considered California cabernet franc, discovering that a new and evocative era for that wine has arrived. Franc is a wonderful way to experience California, for Thanksgiving or otherwise. But the time has come to consider the main event: California cabernet sauvignon.
For sure, this isn’t a wine we often think about at PUNCH, but when you consider wine in an American context, California cabernet is as glistening as it gets. Which is why it’s easy to see how polarizing it can be. It is a Gatsby of a wine, into which we alternately pour our aspirations for the good life, or our gripes—about an overkill of style and the dark lining of new money. Those have been the major drivers of a recent era of cabernet, and none for the better.

That’s honestly a lot of baggage to drop on a grape. And as time has gone on—and, after having beaten up on a lot of overwrought cabernets over the years—I’ve become a reluctant defender. Cabernet sauvignon at its best has a distinct beauty and power, when not burnished with makeup or laden with too many egoist aspirations. You encounter it in modest Bordeaux, in Italian examples like Montesecondo’s Rosso del Rospo, in Australian versions from Coonawarra.

And yes, from California, too. It’s not coincident that there’s been a recent raft of interest in tasting the California cabernets of the 1960s and 1970s; they came from an era when cabernet was allowed to have sharp elbows and forward acidity, and didn’t need to gush over your tongue with a wave of overripe fruit. Most importantly, they had in spades what gives cabernet its wonderful singularity: the complexity of not only fruit, but its many savory aspects. That’s code for the grape’s herbal flavors, which have caused no end of fighting. Sure, those flavors can fall too far to the green side, which comes across as vegetal and astringent. But they are also intrinsic to cabernet’s identity. Get rid of the herb, and you’ve killed the grape’s spirit.

There’s no question that California cabernet has evolved in the past few years, or, more precisely, revisited a classic style of earlier years, when savory and herbaceous characteristics were admired. This is part of the general push in California wine toward the new—a move back to the future. If just four years ago cabernet lagged in this trend, it’s undoubtedly happening today.

It’s even happening in the Napa Valley, which remains California’s cabernet epicenter. As hard as it was to witness October’s wildfires, they also got me thinking once again about the things that are so special about that part of California. And as much as my love for that slice of wine country is complicated—namely because Napa doesn’t usually do humility well—my love for California cabernet in its classic form remains as strong as ever.

It always resurges at this time of year. I’ve heard every side of the argument about cabernet and Thanksgiving—that it’s too strong for turkey, or not fruity enough for the many sweet flavors on the table. Thing is, Thanksgiving is defined by rich food with lots of butter and fat, and the roasted, deep flavors of autumn, all of which cabernet is perfect for. It’s a great Thanksgiving wine, maybe for the second or third bottle, when there’s gravitas to flavors on the table and you slip into what the Italians like to call a “contemplative mode.”

This led us to one of our most curious tastings at PUNCH. Perhaps my years in California prepared me for what was to come, but my colleagues less so. The culprits were the usual culprits in tasting California cabernet: too much alcohol, a bombast of fruit, flavors that seemed roasted or burnt or just plain awkward. It revealed, perhaps, the identity crisis that saddles cabernet today: Its biggest fans during the previous maximalist era endorsed the very things that stop making it true cabernet (namely, that alcohol) and subtlety, with fresh and quiet fruit flavors, dried leaves and smokiness, plus a silken aspect to the often rugged cabernet tannins, which is Snowden Seysses’. The culprits were also known for a “contemplative mode.”

The Classic | Tie

Snowden Vineyards The Ranch Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon

It’s always surprising the Snowden wines tend to fly under the radar; the Snowden family (and its property in the eastern hills of Rutherford) are Napa denizens, and the wines are made by Diana Snowden Seysses, who, when not cabernet-ing is in Burgundy as cellar master for Morey-Saint-Denis’ well-known Domaine Dujac, which is owned by her husband’s family. This is the Snowdens’ mainline cabernet, and once it gets some air, it finds a perfect balance between heft (it’s pushing 15 percent alcohol) and subtlety, with fresh and quiet fruit flavors, dried leaves and smokiness, plus a silken aspect to the often rugged cabernet tannins, which is Snowden Seysses’ trademark—A Burgundian eye on a very non-Burgundian grape.

- Price: $45
- Vintage: 2014

Purchase

Philip Togni Tanbark Hill Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon

Philip Togni, similarly, has managed to stay off Napa’s fame carousel, although those who know history know that he is responsible for some of the valley’s greatest wines. Philip Togni Tanbark Hill is the first blend he’s bottled, and it’s by no means listless. It’s a bold wine with a touch of the old money. The fruit, while sweet, is balanced with acidity, and the wine is a mix of red currant and blackberry flavors. It’s a growling, tough mountain cabernet, but decant it and try it over a couple of hours and you see the full range of cabernet in its classic form.

- Vintage: 2014
- Price: $45

Purchase
The Dunn wines, even more than Togni, are total you-in-or-you-out propositions. Randy Dunn has made his career on tannic, hard wines that chase away those seeking easygoing cabernet. (But, if you’re seeking easygoing cabernet, you’re doing it all wrong.) The wines can be rock hard when young, although this current bottle from a top Napa vintage is just ripe enough, and perhaps kinder and gentler than Dunns of years past—maybe because Randy’s son Mike is taking on more winemaking. It still shows lots of profound tannin, along with iodine and autumn leaves and soy, but is fully formed and flat-out delicious, so long as you’re okay with some structure.

See also: Mayacamas Vineyards

- Price: $110
- Vintage: 2013

**THE OUTLIER | TIE**

Enfield Waterhorse Ridge Fort Ross-Seaview Cabernet Sauvignon

John Lockwood does more subtle varieties so well—including chardonnay and syrah—that it’s hard to admit that we wish he made a lot more cabernet. This comes from nowhere near cabernet country: a parcel right at the edge of the Pacific Ocean, specifically in pinot noir territory. (Vineyards like Flowers and Hirsch are nearby.) Once again, this is one of our favorite cabs in a long time. It’s more distinctly mineral and intense than Enfield’s previous efforts, but there’s so much nuance: a kelp-like marine side, quiet tobacco aromas, subtle plum fruit and a remarkable sense of silken texture and nuance. This should be a case study in how cabernet can speak softly.

- Price: $68
- Vintage: 2014

**Ridge Estate Santa Cruz Mountains Cabernet Sauvignon**

Ridge’s Estate bottle continues to be one of the best values in California cab—a way to taste the Ridge style without paying for the epic Montebello (which, if you have $200, go for the 2014). This is atypical, in that it comes from the mountains above Silicon Valley, about 45 miles south of San Francisco (high above Apple’s futuristic donut, basically). Yet this is also one of the most historic spots for cabernet in the state, dating to the late 1800s. The Estate is especially ripe and friendly in 2014, with just a touch of leafiness but a big whack of almost jammy black fruit, plus that quintessential mineral tang that defines Santa Cruz Mountains’ wine. It’s a case study in California tradition.

See also: Notary Public, Folkway

- Price: $55
- Vintage: 2014

**THE MINIMALIST**

Oeno Sonoma County Cabernet Sauvignon

This project from natural-wine distributor Amy Atwood aims to claim cabernet—that realm of winemaking overkill—back for the less-is-more set. She and her winemaker, Nova Perrill, work with old vines on the Foppiano estate in Healdsburg, and ferment with native yeast in neutral oak. It leads, initially, with a meaty quality, which then opens into lots of light-touch juiciness, a black-olive saltiness and proper grip to the tannin. It’s the sort of cabernet you could find from Sonoma many years ago, and score one for Atwood for proposing that natural should be as much about California cab as Loire franc.

See also: Taken from Granite

- Price: $20
- Vintage: 2016