

11 Stellar Low-Alcohol Wines That Will Change How You Think About Low-Alcohol Wines

These bottles deliver sensational flavor without serious alcohol levels.

By [Sara L. Schneider](#) on February 26, 2020

There's been a rash of low-alcohol beverages entering the market—from hard seltzers to Truly and their competitors, driven by the demand of millennials and Gen-Xers looking to enjoy a buzz socially, but not be hammered by high percentages of alcohol.

The wine world has also seemed to jump on this trend, but in truth, it's been happening with wine over the last 10 years or so.

When Jamie Kutch—a lapsing Wall Street trader—made his first barrel of Pinot Noir, the alcohol level, when yeasts had consumed all the sugar the grapes had accumulated in the vineyard, came in at 16.3 percent. The wine wasn't without pedigree: It was Michael Browne who had given Kutch the chance to make it. And fans of Sonoma Pinot know that Browne, along with his then-business-partner, Dan Kosta, went on to create an enormous following for their Kosta Browne Pinot Noirs. The truth is, the early Kosta Browne Pinots (the first barrel of which they famously made in Kosta's garage) were bruisers on the alcohol front, and that style resonated with consumers of the day—the rich, mouth-filling texture and warming finish were satisfying, even if one slid under the table way too fast.

But Kutch wasn't impressed with his first wine. "It was heavy and without balance," he says. "It left me with a syrupy taste in my mouth that was really off-putting." And in subsequent vintages, he set about reining in the alcohol. The obvious move was to pick earlier, before sugar levels in the fruit had spiked too high. But it's not as simple as that, according to Kutch, if you want ripe fruit flavors and an interesting wine. "Today we work in the vineyard," he says, "for example, by minimizing water, not irrigating. The grapes ripen earlier and at lower sugar levels, which translates directly to lower-alcohol wines. Also, we don't pull leaves in front of the fruit, leaving it shaded, so it's not directly exposed to the sun, which drives sugar levels higher." And in recent vintages, he's moved toward whole-cluster fermentations—leaving stems in during the process—to build structure and the flavor profile he loves.

Kutch's journey toward brighter, fresher, more balanced, and more terroir-driven wines—wines that carry a clearer sense of the place they came from—parallels an entire movement over the past decade or so. It might be a chicken-and-egg question as to which side is driving this, but great producers across the board are pulling back from the über-ripe, score-chasing fruit bombs of the late 1990s and early aughts. And wine lovers are responding to a leaner style—more restrained alcohol levels that capture layers of fascinating complexity before they're lost to plain fat, highly extracted fruit.

The trend is noticeable in Napa Valley, where the new buzzwords for the Cabernet family are "freshness" and "tension." (On that last front, picture acidity punching up texture across the palate.) In many cases, lowering alcohol levels is not the goal itself, merely a by-product of savvy dialing in to a style that best expresses particular vineyard sites.

In the Spring Mountain District, where Newton's vineyards—interspersed by great swaths of carefully managed natural growth—wrap around breathtakingly steep hills, Mayacamas Olds, head of viticulture, combines intricate hand-farming with technology and science to find the sweet spot for micro-blocks across the property. "If you can get the grapes ripe at lower sugars," she says, "you will get a better balance of freshness and complexity."

"Our ID is finesse," concludes Newton general manager Jean-Baptiste Rivail, "a balance between fruit and acidity [which drops as sugar levels rise]—not an introverted balance, but delicate. If you have something to say, it's thoughtful." For Rivail, avoiding "over-the-top" Cabernet involves precision, farming their beautiful, complicated vineyards with intension.

Finesse is not a recent discovery in Napa Valley, of course (and certainly hasn't been achieved across the board). Icons like Cathy Corison long ago found special sites capable of balance (St. Helena's Kronos Vineyard, in Corison's case), and honed their farming practices and picking decisions to create vibrant, complex, age-worthy wines from year to year—never chasing the high-octane style reported to earn higher scores from key critics. Interestingly enough, Corison has garnered significant acclaim for staying her course through the years. And her wines have been evidence all along that Napa Valley Cabernet can speak of place and develop layers of elegant complexity with age.

It would seem that more and more winemakers and collectors alike are evolving into Corison's way of thinking, across a range of varieties. While the trend toward lower alcohol levels and higher acidity extends to whites as well, we've concentrated on red bottles that have caught our attention recently with their pinpoint balance. Somewhat arbitrarily

(because there's no magic number that guarantees balance), we've limited our picks to Bordeaux varieties under 14.5 percent alcohol, and Pinots and Rhônes under 14 percent. This comes with a big caveat, though, because along with many other regulatory oddities, the TTB (Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau) allows wines under 14 percent ABV (alcohol by volume) a full 1.5 percent leeway in the number stated. (So the label could claim 13.5 percent alcohol, while the wine contains only 12 percent.) And wines over 14 percent can vary by 1 percent. (The label might say 14.9 percent even if the wine weighs in at 15.9 percent.)

In our experience, though, producers striving for transparent wines of place also tend to extend transparency to their labeling. And the wines here nail the excitement when fruit is caught in that Goldilocks moment when ripeness and freshness converge.



Photo : Courtesy of Anaba wines

Anaba Wines 2016 WestLands Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast

Although Anaba's new Vintner's House is in Carneros, their WestLands

Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are blended from very cool vineyards within a few miles of the coast. This is a complex, age-worthy Pinot with intense, bright red fruit—cherry and cranberry—punched up by great acidity and layered with spice and a hint of mushrooms.

13.6 percent ABV, \$64



Photo : Photo: Courtesy of Kronos Vineyard

Corison 2015 Kronos Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, St. Helena, Napa Valley

A vintage from Cathy Corison's old Kronos vines that expresses the full range of fruit flavors she prizes, from red currant through plum all the way to dark berries. As the fruit opens up, so do layers of interesting spice, fresh herbs (mint), leafy tobacco, and earthy loam. This is a year that delivered the velvety tannins Corison strives for, but a vintage that promises a long life in the cellar as well.

13.2 percent, \$195



Photo : Courtesy of Cornell Vineyards

Cornell Vineyards 2015 Cabernet Sauvignon, Sonoma Fountaingrove

Perched high on the ridge where Sonoma meets Napa, the new-ish Cornell Vineyards should be on your radar. In the hands of consulting winemaker Françoise Pechon (Araujo, Viader, Stag's Leap Wine Cellars ...) and director of viticulture and winemaking Elizabeth Tangney, Cornell Cabernet makes the most of its mountain site, with a fresh, complex, structured profile. The 2015 has deep, integrated layers of crushed rock, exotic spices, mint, and orange peel under dark plum and blackberry flavors and high-toned floral aromas.

14.4 percent, \$150



Photo : Courtesy of Emeritus Vineyards

Emeritus Vineyards 2016 Pinot Hill East Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley

This inaugural vintage from the east side of Emeritus' Pinot Hill Vineyard is bright and savory—far from thin, if that's what you're thinking based on the alcohol level. A fresh ocean breeze is joined by savory herbs, white pepper, and loam, followed by lively red fruit (rhubarb, cranberry, strawberry) with a kick of orange peel.

13 percent, \$75



Photo : Courtesy of Jackson Family Wines

Hickinbotham 2016 Clarendon Vineyard The Revivalist Merlot, McLaren Vale, Australia

No “wimpy Merlot,” this bright and elegant version from Hickinbotham’s winemaker Chris Carpenter (Cardinale, Lokoya) has a firm but integrated backbone of tannin underlying fresh cherry, raspberry, and cassis layered with notes of violets, dark chocolate, and crushed herbs.

14 percent, \$75



Photo : Courtesy of Inman Family Wines

Inman Family 2016 OGV Estate Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley, Sonoma County

This Olivet Grange Vineyard bottling from Inman Family has a remarkable sweet-savory balance. Haunting floral aromas are layered with loamy forest floor, while lively strawberry and cranberry flavors taper to citrus and hints of earthy minerality on a long finish.

13.8 percent, \$73



Photo : Courtesy of Kutch Wines

Kutch Wines 2017 McDougall Ranch Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast

Vibrant acidity from a cold site just 3.5 miles from the Pacific Ocean brightens strawberry and rhubarb flavors in this Kutch Pinot. The fruit is balanced by earthy loam and an herbal character from whole-cluster fermentation, adding structure and complexity.

13 percent, \$62



Photo : Photo: Newton Napa Valley

Newton 2017 Puzzle, Napa Valley

Consider this a sneak peek at a vintage releasing early this spring. Newton's 2017 Puzzle is a complex, aromatic blend primarily from the winery's home-base Spring Mountain vineyards but with splashes from their Mount Veeder and Yountville estate vineyards as well. Briary blackberries open on the nose, layered with herbal notes, forest, and mint. A firm tannin structure supports the stamp of the place—fresh berries.

14 percent, \$125



Photo : Photo: Courtesy of Spottswoode Estate

Spottswoode 2015 Family Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, St. Helena, Napa Valley

From another longtime bastion of balance, this beautiful iteration of Spottswoode's flagship opens with layers of floral notes, anise, mint, cedar, espresso, and dark fruit. Flavors of boysenberry and dark

cherry, backed by magnificent structure, offer the best of both worlds—freshness and opulence—with crushed rock and tobacco bringing up a savory finish.

14.4 percent, \$225



Photo : Photo: Courtesy of Trinity Hill

Trinity Hill 2016 Homage Syrah, Hawkes Bay, New Zealand

The amount of bright, ripe fruit in this Trinity Hill red is remarkable at this alcohol level. Blueberry and plum are layered with wilder Syrah characteristics, including white pepper, black olive and tobacco leaf.

13 percent, \$150

Photo : courtesy of

Vérité 2016 Le Désir Red Wine, Sonoma County

This Cabernet Franc–based blend from Vérité offers gorgeous aromatics—rose petals over blackberry liqueur and fresh mint. Juicy

dark berry and plum flavors are laced with baking spices, and fine-grained tannins are delivered with perfect tension in this bright, balanced wine.

14.1 percent, \$425