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TOP POSTS

Welcome to the new The Kitchn!

We have redesigned the site to make it easier to browse our delicious content. Check out all our new channels, from Advice to Kitchens to Gatherings. We have made it easier to browse our recipes and our tours, and to explore all our categories. Enjoy, and happy cooking!

You can [read more about the change](#), find [Apartment Therapy here](#), or [hide this message](#).

Do You Think California Wine Is Cool? *On Diversity, Stereotypes & California*



California accounts for over 90% of all the wine produced in the United States and well over half of what is consumed here, so I am sure that most of our wine-loving readers have tasted more than the occasional Californian wine. What is your impression of California wine? Do you gravitate from it — or away from it?







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Despite their reign, 'California' wines are too often criticized as overly alcoholic, too expensive, not very food-friendly, excessively extracted, too much of a fruit-bomb, overly jammy and over-ripe! While I have certainly come across individual wines that fit these descriptions, I have tasted many more that strongly defy these dangerous generalizations, instead showing elegance, purity, freshness and above all balance and a sense of place. So why are there such divergent viewpoints?

### California = Diversity

Extending well over half a million acres and over 600 miles from north to south, California wine cannot possibly be so homogenous as the criticisms outlined above. California wine country can broadly be broken down into the large warm, inland area of the Central Valley, which produces over 70% of California wine, and the moderately cooler north and central coasts, which are home to the well-known premium regions of Napa, Sonoma, Mendocino, Santa Cruz, Monterey, Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo.

### Why Some California Wines Live Up to their Negative Stereotyping

The Central Valley, has long been the engine room of California wine production. Here, most of the vineyards are located on the hot, fertile, flat valley floor. Under these conditions, grape sugars can rise quickly, flavors become baked and yields are high, resulting in hot, jammy, simple wines. Many of the high volume wine brands labeled simply as "California" are made from Central Valley fruit. While some can be quite good, many do succumb to the unfortunate stereotyping cited above.

That said, the Central Valley is not the only culprit responsible for the negative press on California wine. Many of the premium more coastal designated viticultural areas have fallen prey to the influence of certain wine critics who believe that bigger is always better, awarding the highest scores to the most powerful, most extracted, most bullish and boldest tasting wines. Wines that may create palate impact but are difficult to really drink or enjoy. I call these 'knife and fork wines'!

### Generalizations Are Dangerous

It is all too easy, but a pity, to believe in generalizations. California is not just a diverse in terms of soils, climates, topography and grape varieties grown, it is also diverse in terms of its winemakers, wine production scale, winemaking philosophies and ideas. This is a very good thing, as it means that wines are produced to meet a wide range of consumer budgets, tastes and occasions.



## California Wines that Rocked Mary's World Over the Past Weeks

To finish off I would like to especially mention three recently enjoyed California wines under \$40 that for me personify the purity, freshness and above all balance that one should and can expect from a California wine.

**2008 Clos du Val Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley, \$35** - What struck me most about this wine was its brightness, liveliness and vibrancy of fruit, yet it wasn't a fruit bomb - the fruit was elegant, measured and persistent. Very true both to its Cabernet varietal characteristics, as well as its Napa valley origin. My only disappointment was that this was the only bottle I had, as I would like to cellar some and taste another bottle in a few years from now.

**2006 Ridge Three Valleys, Sonoma County, \$22** - The current vintage on the market is the 2009, but I pulled this out of my wine stash a week ago. It is a blend of predominantly zinfandel with small amounts of Petite Sirah, Carignan and Grenache. It was delicious, showing some lovely mature flavors of earth and leather. The Three Valley's is the least expensive Ridge offering and is a wonderful way to get a sense of why the wines are so sought after and age-worthy. Not bold, but captivating, not a blockbuster but lithe, nimble and layered.

**2007 Bonny Doon Vineyard Le Cigare Volant, Santa Cruz (Central Coast), California, \$35** - I have mentioned this wine several times before. It is a firm favorite and fixture in our house for special occasions. We enjoyed it with friends again last week. What I particularly love about this wine (and indeed about so many of the Bonny Doon wines) is how they combine new world bright fruit flavor and old world savoriness and minerality. Vibrant, layered, gently unfolds with each sip.

Some other favorite California producers to check out are Corison, Viader and Cain in Napa, Goldeneye and Migration in Anderson Valley, Cobb, Patz & Hall, Hirsch, C.



Donatiello and La Follette in Russian River Valley or Sonoma Coast.

Until next week, enjoy the many faces of California wine!

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- [It's California Wine Month Again](#)
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(Images: Mary Gorman-McAdams, MW)