

# "THE OSTENTATIOUS PARLAY"

by Mark Gudgel

"When I made this wine, I needed a creative outlet, and a financial outlet. I needed to be independent. I needed to make my own mark, I needed to make my own wine."

I first met Sam Smith at Smith-Madrone, the winery that bears this last name, a few years ago on a trip to the Napa Valley. The winery, naturally, also bears the last name of his father, Stu, and uncle, Charley, who were among the early post-prohibition Napa Valley pioneers, establishing their Spring Mountain winery years before the infamous "Judgment of Paris" that broke the dam and led to a flood of wineries springing up over the past forty years.

Sam is amiable yet stoic, with a handshake like a vice grip and a coozie in his back pocket at all times. His blue jeans and baseball cap accurately suggest an agriculturalist, while his broad shoulders are evidence of a relentless work ethic. Sam has traveled the world as part of his duties at Smith-Madrone, but spends most of his time up on Spring Mountain, tending to grapes, making wine, and showing visitors around. To an outsider like me, it sounds idyllic, but Sam knew it couldn't last forever.

"I was working at a restaurant in Tasmania as a somm, and a couple from Texas were in. I was describing for them what it takes – buying the land, planting the grapes... pick, harvest, wait two years in barrel, bottle it, wait another year..."

The woman's eyes got big, and she said "That sounds like a pretty big bet." Her husband added: "That's like a parlay, a pretty big bet." Then his wife added, in her beautiful Carolina accent, "That's an ostentatious parlay, a *huge* bet."

Years later Sam's wine, Curly St. James, was released with the phrase "The Ostentatious Parlay" written below the name. "For me, it's the ostentatious parlay... it's gonna take a lot for me to

win, but if I do, it's a big win," Sam told me.

One look at a bottle of Curly St. James suggests immediately that it's different from most of the wines that people send for me to review. The bottle's shape is reminiscent of the grand cru Chateau Haut-Brion, while the golden wax that replaces the more traditional foil sets it off from a distance. Up close, the label is a finely detailed work of art. The words "Meraki" "Mudita" "Querencia" "Fernweh" and "Eunoia" appear in faint gold lettering around the edges, each one in a different language, each one meaningful to Sam. He was kind enough to take the time to explain them to a one-language yutz like me.

"Meraki" he began. "That's to do something with all of your heart, all of your love, all of your soul."

"Mudita: that's the opposite of schadenfreude. It's getting pleasure out of other peoples pleasure."

I want people to get pleasure out of this wine. People looking for something different and unique should get pleasure from this wine, and that will bring me pleasure."

"Querencia means your life is your work, and you put all of your life and your soul in your work."



“Fernweh is a homesickness for a place you’ve never been. For me, that means I can’t wait for people to try this wine in eight, ten, thirty years. I have this uncontrollable urge to get somewhere I can’t be, and that’s all I could find in the languages of the world to describe that feeling.”

“Last is Eunoia, which is essentially the rapport between a speaker and his audience. As a winemaker, I have to have a rapport with the people who drink my wine.”

These tiny words, inscribed upon the label, in essence sum up who I know Sam Smith to be. He’s thoughtful. He’s an artist. And he’s passionate about his craft. He desperately wants people to try – and love, this wine. Ultimately, the attention to detail paid to the appearance of the bottle is but a hint at what’s inside. Sam’s first and current vintage, the 2013, is incredible. Equal parts Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc, it’s a bold, dark monster, with an elegant streak lurking below the surface. 14.5% ABV, it’s pretty clearly Napa from start to finish – and there’s nothing at all wrong with that.

With my glass resting on the countertop, I took in the bouquet from a good three feet away. The deepest ruby coloration you can imagine, it was beautiful even before it reached my palate. Upon tasting it, bright purple fruits abound, blackberry and currant,

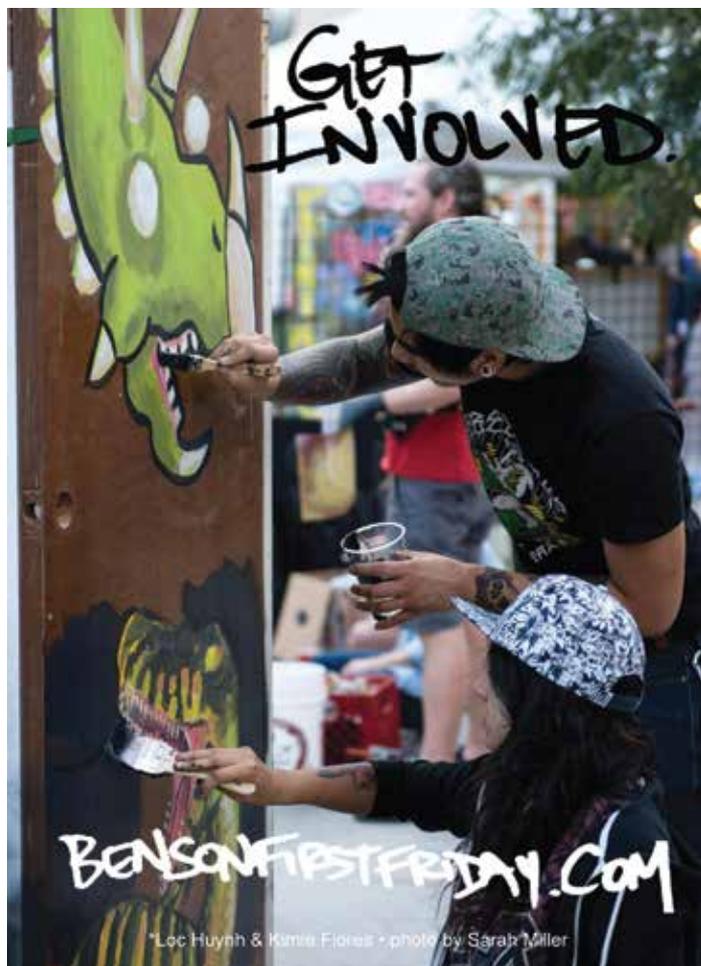


a hint of jammy razz, and the scent of leather that I find almost always leads to structure on the palate. Red fruits and more purple and black ones in the mouth, with undeniable pipe tobacco notes and more of the saddle leather revealed by the nose. The fine yet persistent tannins draw out the finish and linger on the gums. A

“ Fernweh is a homesickness for a place you’ve never been. For me, that means I can’t wait for people to try this wine in eight, ten, thirty years. I have this uncontrollable urge to get somewhere I can’t be, and that’s all I could find in the languages of the world to describe that feeling. ”

fruit bomb like this needs a lot of acidity and tannins to balance it out, and yet this one indeed hits the mark. This is a beautiful wine. This is an ostentatious parlay. And with a boutique production of only 120 cases, for the lover of great wine, this is an opportunity not to be missed.

While Curly St. James is currently available only online, the entire Smith-Madrone portfolio can be found at **The Winery** right here in Omaha. Sam also told me that he plans to attend **VinNEBRASKA**, which will be held on April 13 to 14 of 2018. Tickets are available at [www.vinnebraska.com](http://www.vinnebraska.com). While Sam won’t be pouring this wine at the event this year, it’s still worth coming to meet him, and to taste the wines of Smith-Madrone that were the precursor to the soon-to-be-infamous Curly St. James.



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# THE GREAT AMERICAN CABSAUV

## Review 2017

by Mark Gudgel



I had “The Library Club” over at my house again, everyone having chipped in a bit of money to taste through some older wines that none of us individually would be likely to splurge on. Not for the first time, a guest perusing my cellar inventory was quick to point out that I drink an awful lot of Cabernet Sauvignon, and in particular, American Cabernet. “You need to branch out,” he said matter-of-factly, sipping at a glass of 1996 Caymus CabSauv. Do I?

I love domestic Cabernet Sauvignon. The name means “Savage” and there’s something about the combination of new-world terroir and American winemaking that so often renders these wines

as elegant monsters, a seemingly paradoxical juxtaposition of characteristics for which I and so many others adore them. Say all you like about the merits of a well-nuanced Right Bank Bordeaux or a delicate Willamette Valley Pinot Noir – I like those too, I really do. But if I had my way, I’d drink a bold, rich, American Cabernet about five nights of every week. And, as it turns out, I have my way.

Since I devote a disproportionate amount of my time to drinking domestic Cabernet Sauvignon versus other wines, for the second year running I thought I’d share a list of the best, most interesting, stand-out American Cabernet Sauvignons I had the pleasure of tasting in 2017. When possible, I’ve listed the Omaha-area

establishment where I'm most likely to pick up a bottle in case you want one too. From time to time I remark upon "QPR" which stands for Quality-Price Ratio.

“ It's winter now, and Cabernet Sauvignon is precisely the thing to keep you warm ”

The prices I list are based either on what the winery lists online or, when they don't, Vivino's estimate. To know precisely what any wine will cost, you're best bet is to ask the person selling it to you.

I know that Cab Sauv isn't everybody's favorite wine the way it is mine, and I assure you that I'm already working diligently on an article about a terrific Willamette Valley producer for the spring issue of Food & Spirits Magazine. That said, it's winter now, and Cabernet Sauvignon is precisely the thing to keep you warm – in case you needed an excuse. Below are my favorites from 2017. Enjoy!

#### **Abeja 2014, Washington State (\$52)**

*Available online from the producer*

This is the second year in a row that Abeja's Cab has made my list, so they're batting a thousand. Abeja is, simply put, quickly becoming one of my very favorite Cabernets. Abeja means "bee" en Espanol, and symbolizes a simple yet profound respect for agriculture and the earth. This summer, I'm heading to Washington to taste wine, and this is one place that's a priority for me to visit.

Bold and full in body with flawless deep Cabernet color and an inviting nose, what really lunges out at me both on this vintage and the previous are the ornate and diverse patterns of spices that linger amidst the more obvious dark purple and black fruit flavors. Those spices, ranging from hints of cinnamon to ginger bread to something I couldn't quite place — thyme? sage? — create a nuanced sense of complexity, and are what makes Abeja so incredible to me. Originally recommended to me by my friend Jay, the Washington wine guru, I now recommend this wine to everyone I meet.

#### **Barnard Griffin 2015, Washington State (\$17)**

*Available at Noli's Pizza*

I did a feature in this magazine a few months ago on Rob Griffin, one of the original Washington State wine pioneers. The short version is that this guy is amazing, and not only has incredible passion for what he does, but also the skill to back it

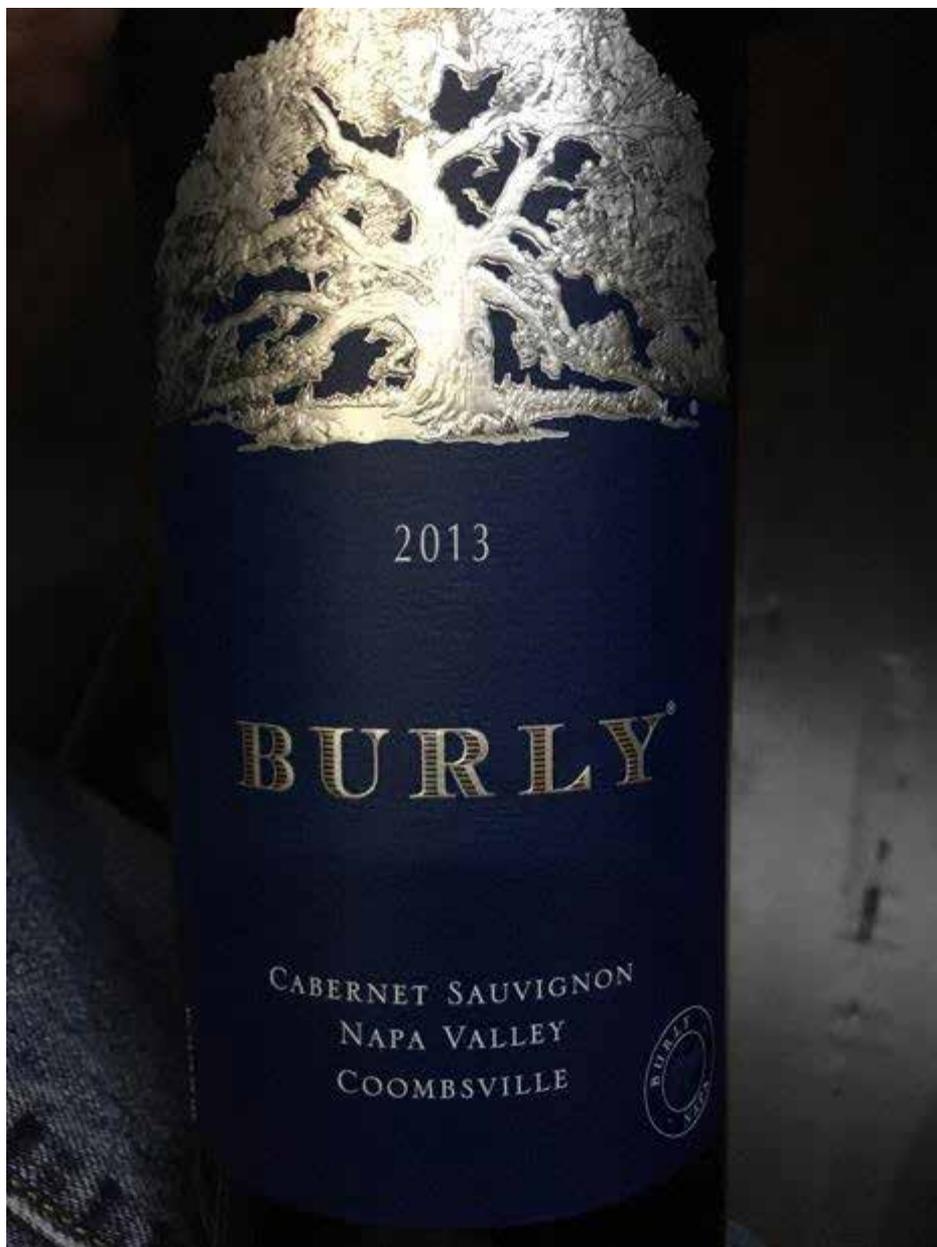
up. Equally cool is his commitment to keeping his wine reasonably priced, which is how a bottle of wine that lands in my top wines of the year can cost less than a couple of movie tickets, giving this wine an outstanding QPR.

Dark yet approachable with an innate smoothness and impeccable balance erring on the side of being fruit-forward, this is a crowd pleaser that even wine snobs will enjoy. Blue fruits and traces of oak persist throughout. Undeniably Washington, it's undeniably good.

#### **Burly Special Selection 2013, Napa Valley (\$130)**

*Available at Omaha Wine Company*

It was Hank McCrorie, the proprietor of Burley, to whom I first admitted that if I had my way, I'd drink Cab almost every night, to which he replied "I do have my way, and that's precisely what I do." And just like that, this article was born. Hank is a kind man, and I make it a point to see him whenever he's in town. He's almost always at the Omaha Wine Company shows, and I would highly recommend you take the time to pay him a visit.





**Chateau Montelena 2014, Napa Valley, (\$50)**

*Available at Winestyles*

If you're reading a lengthy article on Cabernet, then there's probably not much I can tell you about this place that you don't already know. Famous for Chardonnay (either see the movie *Bottle Shock* or read George Taber's *Judgment of Paris*), they also make extraordinary, old world style Cab. The reserve this year was phenomenal as well, but I like this one for its friendlier price point and undeniable quality.

Brightly colored with a flash of cherry on the nose, this wine is impeccably clean with a gorgeous gleaming ruby hue. The nose took me back to Calistoga and is truly a classic Napa sensation. On the palate, beautiful vanilla notes rest comfortably behind pronounced flavors of cherry, which in time open up to become black currant, chokecherry, mild raspberry, and more. Fruit driven in youth, it will lay down well and ultimately give way to more old world characteristics that linger just below the surface. A beautiful wine, I enjoyed it a great deal, and it paired brilliantly with beef tips.

**DeLille Four Flags 2015,**  
Washington State, (\$68)

*Available at Whole Foods, and will be featured at VinNEBRASKA*

DeLille is another one I was introduced to by my friend Jay in Washington, and another repeat wine on this list. Last year, to feature them in this article, I had to have them send the wine to a friend in Kansas City who then brought it to me in Omaha because DeLille couldn't ship to Nebraska. Then just a month or so ago I was walking through Whole Foods and saw a bottle of their wine on the shelf. And now that they have distribution here, I'm going to be sure everyone knows it, because they make excellent wines.

Washington State Cab from start to finish, it's somewhat delicate on the nose, and utterly astonishing on the palate, opening into a wide variety of flavors ranging from baking spices to dark blue and purple fruits, a delicate kiss of something like butter toffee, subtle walnut, more vibrant raspberry, and more, along with formidable structure from well-integrated tannins and tremendous balance and age-ability. Like the Abeja, this is one of those wines that has me gaga over Washington State.



Hank's "normal" Cab, which is anything but, is amazing stuff, while his Special Selection is utterly astounding. Winemaker Massimo Monticelli tastes through all eighty barrels of Cabernet and chooses only the best ten for the "Special Selection" label. The results are undeniable. I feel often that at times my words fall short of description. All I can say here is that if you are, like me, a love of Napa Cabernet, then this wine will absolutely blow you away.

**Chankaska Creek 2014, Minnesota(\$60)**

*Available online from the producer*

A friend and I were driving back to Omaha from Minneapolis, where we had both just taken our Wine and Spirits Education Trust (WSET) Level II exams. We were both a bit nervous about the results, if I'm being completely honest. Though in multiple-guess format, the test was tougher than I had expected. Fifty questions from a bank of thousands and I got asked a question about the flavor profile of silver tequila? I wouldn't drink tequila with your mouth, and there was nowhere to write in "it tastes like vomit," so I just took a guess. That was this sort of thing that concerned me about an exam for which I had studied for more than half a year. We had taken the time while in Minnesota to check out a few Minnesota wineries, and we had been duly impressed with the quality of their wine. In light of this, on the way back, we made sure our charted course took us past one more: Chankaska Creek.

This is Chankaska's first Cabernet, and that bodes well for future vintages. Though made in Minnesota, this wine is 100% Napa Cab when it comes to fruit, and is in fact taken from a prized vineyard of Andy Beckstoffer. An herbaceous nose, the body is black cherry, blackberry, and hints of powdered cocoa. Aged for 20 months in 70% new French oak, this is one of the wines that has me so downright impressed with the Minnesota wine scene. Oh, and both of us passed our exam with merit, despite my absolute disinterest in tequila.



### Euclid 2013, Napa, (\$100)

*Available online from the producer*

Yet another repeat offender on my list of favorites, I'll go out on a limb and say that you'll likely see the next vintage on next year's list as well. Mike Farmer and his son, Lucas, are set apart as a winemaking team by a combination of pedigree and passion. The result every year is a handful of barrels full of some of the best Cabernet, Syrah, and Merlot I've ever tried. I'm especially infatuated with their Cabernet, which is priced modestly considering its quality. If I was going to join a wine club and I could only choose one, I'd make it Euclid.

Honestly, I don't even need to drink this wine. I could just sit here and smell the nose all day and I'd be happy. Beautifully nuanced and focused on ripe red and purple fruits, despite its youth the 2013 Euclid Cab Sauv is drinking exceptionally well. Nicely balanced, erring in favor of the beautiful red fruits in the profile, there are hints of delicate leather and maybe eucalyptus hiding somewhere in there, and enough acidity to keep the mouth permanently watering. Finely-integrated tannins hold it up nicely and linger upon the palate, lengthening the finish. I'd pair this with steak or, at Mike's suggestion, some really great tacos.

### Fitch Mountain 2014, Sonoma County, (\$18)

*Available at The Winery*

This is the small, unadvertised label of Mike and Nicol Duffy who own Optima, one of the best small wineries in Sonoma. You'll see this Cab, and also the Merlot, around town in places that serve great wine—I had the Merlot with dinner at Stirnella just the other night. The truly stunning thing about it is that it comes from amazing winemakers and excellent fruit, and still costs what it does. This is another absolutely astonishing QPR for this year's list.

This particular Cabernet I served recently at an event, and it was very well-received by a diverse crowd of imbibers. Still quite young and certain to benefit from decanting or cellar time, the dark purple fruits and leathery qualities, along with a very drinkable nature and, again, the low cost, make this a wine to be sure you don't miss.

### JH Collection: The Debate 2013, Napa Valley

*Available at the Omaha Wine Company*

My crush on Jean Hoefliger is well documented at this point, and for good reason. Not only is he one of the best winemakers in the world, but he is also an amiable, charming, thoughtful human being. Evidence of this rests in the fact that these wines are made purposefully to inspire civil debate amongst people in these turbulent times. Jean believes, as do I, that people need to sit around the table and talk more, and like Jean, I, too, believe that wine can be that thing that brings us to the table.

In the last edition of Food & Spirits Magazine, I wrote a longer article about the entire JH Collection that is available in Omaha. While you can get my lengthier tasting notes on all three Debate wines there, what you really need to know about these wines is that to find a winemaker of Jean's caliber working with cult fruit like this isn't easy, and often costs five, ten, event twenty times what these cost. The Missouri Hopper, Dr. Crane, and To Kalon vineyard bottles vary in price, and are each extraordinary in their own right. If you're considering a splurge, consider The Debate.

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### Kelleher 2012, Napa Valley, (\$95)

*Available at the Omaha Wine Company*

If you're driving up-Valley on Highway 29, away from San Francisco, then not far past the town of Napa, on your left, you'll see a familiar name: "Brix." This Napa Valley establishment is an absolutely terrific restaurant, very worth visiting, and behind it is



planted ten acres of Cabernet affectionately referred to by those who tend it as the “Brix Vineyard.” As the sun sets atop the Mayacamas in the west, the view of the vines at twilight as surreal. This is a place I tell everyone to visit.

From that Brix Vineyard comes this bottle of wine, which I’ve told many people this year might be one of the best I’ve had. Opulent without overstatement, the balance and smoothness of this wine, straight out of the bottle, is something to write home about. In reviewing my tasting notes for several years back on this one, the word I kept using was “balanced”. Left bank Bordeaux in some ways, totally Napa in others, this is one all Cab lovers simply have to try.

**Kenefick Ranch Chris’s Cuvee 2014, Napa Valley, (\$65)**

*Available at V. Mertz*

Kenefick Ranch is one of those wineries that I know I need to visit soon, but in the meantime, Chris Kenefick is in Omaha regularly enough for me to get my fix. One of my favorite small producers in Napa, when you see Kenefick Ranch wines, I encourage you not to pass on them. In particular, I’ve found Chris’s Cuvee to be consistently excellent from year to year. Until I do get out to visit them in person, this excellent bottle of wine will remain my link to this wonderful small producer.

It is a hint of dark chocolate, from start to finish, that really sets this wine off for me. The nose takes time to open up, while the dark purple bordering-on-black heart fades to vibrant ruby hues around the edges. On the palate, beautiful blackberry and darkest plum, hazelnut, supported by ultra-fine tannins lending substantial structure, make it a force of a wine, a young one that I think will age terrifically. The finish lingers like that note of a piano that never truly seems to end, and may still be resonating by the time the next key is struck, by the time the next sip is taken.

**Keswick Vineyards Estate Reserve 2013, Virginia, (\$65)**

*Available online from the producer*

Last year, when I reached out to Keswick Vineyards, the winemaker there sent me a vertical that ranged from 2009 to 2013. While each wine was certainly unique, I was impressed by the consistency of the quality from year to year, as well as the seemingly age-worthy nature of the wines. Complex yet easy to enjoy, this wine helped me to quickly understand why the Virginia wine scene is starting to gain momentum. While I normally go to Virginia for other things, the next time I’m out there I’ll be sure to make visiting Keswick Vineyards a priority.



The 2013 is an elegant, graphite-laden, well-structured Cabernet in which the dark lingering fruits are almost an afterthought. Old world in character with a bouquet that you can smell from a considerable distance, if you’re looking to be introduced to the wines of Virginia, I can think of no better ambassador than this one.

**LedsonHowell Mountain 2013, Sonoma County, (\$100)**

*Available online from the producer*

From a winery that we visited on our honeymoon, and the same vintage as our marriage, this wine was destined to be a favorite of mine even before I tasted it. Howell Mountain is in Napa, but the Ledson winery is in Sonoma, where Steve Noble Ledson built it years ago. This past year, Sonja and I had the immense pleasure of having lunch with Steve and several members of his stellar staff, and it was an honor I’ll not soon forget. The Ledson winery is an incredible story—the family an incredible family—and the people that Steve has surrounded himself with at his passion project are all humans of the highest caliber. The winery sustained mild damage in the recent fires, with an impressive blaze roosting above it on the mountainside. Check it out online, or visit them in person to support this extraordinary Sonoma producer.

While this wine had me at the big, deep, rich nose, or maybe even before that with the nostalgia, it didn’t stop there. The terroir is evident in this wine, as the brooding mountain fruit from what is one of Napa’s premier AVAs was softened slightly at



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the hands of a skilled artisan. An array of flavors opened up over time, and with a quick decant, including blackberry, blueberry, deep dark cherry, and hints of refined leather. I told Sonja that this is one of the finest wines I have tried all year... possibly in my lifetime.

#### **Mountain Terraces Vineyard Lex's 2014, Sonoma County**

*Wines are difficult to acquire, but worth it if you have the time and resources.*

Some of my best memories are those of times that I didn't have a plan, and one such memory comes from my visit to Mountain Terraces. Perhaps sometime I'll have room to tell that story, though for now, I'll focus on the wine. Perched two thousand feet up on Moon Mountain, Mountain Terraces offers a spectacular view of the San Francisco Bay, and some truly incredible wines to go along with it. My recommendation, if you're traveling, would be to reach out to them about staying at one of the two well-furnished houses that overlook the vineyards up there. I can think of no better place in all of wine country to make camp. And equally important if you want to try Mountain Terraces wines is the fact that staying there is the only way I know of to get your hands on them.

Simply put, the Lex's 2014 is a killer Cabernet. I inhaled deeply the nose and I knew that instantly, my face lit up with pleasure. On the palate, opulent, deep purple, high-elevation mountain fruit comes along with rich cocoa and a sense of place that could only come from Moon Mountain. A medley of fresh berries lingers in long-grain tannins upon the palate, well into the finish. Smooth and balanced even in its youth, this wine will, in my estimation, age forever.

#### **Palmaz 2013, Napa Valley, (\$165)**

*Available online from the producer*

The Palmaz winery in the south end of the Napa Valley was one of the most extraordinary things that I saw in 2017. State-of-the-art technology and stunning architecture combine in a winery that produces some of the best wines I've ever had. The winery juxtaposes space-age tech with Argentine heritage and an upscale sense of dignity, and to make things even more extraordinary, Christian Palmaz was one of the nicest guys I've ever met. For more, you could read my review in American Winery Guide, or just take my word for it and add Palmaz to the top of your short list of places to visit.

This is a dark, full-bodied Cabernet with incredibly smooth tannins and impeccable balance, driven by dark purple and black fruits and layered in complex notes of everything from leather to cedar to baking spice. It drinks perfectly now, but will age for at least as long as I will, and probably far more gracefully.

#### **Pine & Brown Rutherford 2014, Napa Valley, (\$70)**

*Available at V. Mertz and will be featured at VinNEBRASKA*

Fellow Nebraskan and Omaha native Tom Rees has really set himself apart in the world of wine, in my opinion. Pine & Brown, named for the street corner in Napa where both his house and tiny winery are nestled, is fast becoming a cult wine on account of Tom's painstaking viticultural craftsmanship. This is the second vintage of a Rutherford-specific Cabernet from Pine & Brown, but the first that I've tried, and it makes my mouth water for future vintages.

Bright fruit, yet still imposing in every way, the Rutherford dust makes for a somewhat leathery combination of flavor and



mouthfeel, while deep purple fruits and hints of vanilla do what they can to expand the horizons of the palate. The long, lingering finish is incredible, and made for an awesome experience pairing this wine with cheese and light charcuterie, though to be sure, this is a steak wine.

**Prairie Berry 3 Red Necks, South Dakota, (\$19)**

*Available online from the producer*

One of our family’s holiday traditions has long included a stay in the mountains over the New Year, and often when those mountains are the Paha Sapa, the Black Hills of South Dakota, we like to visit Prairie Berry. That time of year, there’s always a fire crackling, and we enjoy sitting near to it and sharing a glass of wine and some cheese. While this producer is perhaps more famous for their “Red Ass Rhubarb”, our favorites are typically the vinifera, and this Cabernet exemplifies why that is.

Bright and vibrant from nose to finish, it’s less imposing than some of the monstrous, brooding Napa beasts on this list, but no less satisfying, with minimalist structure and ample cherry and vanilla flavors. It’s ready to drink now. As Cabernet goes, this is a crowd-pleaser, a great wine for the patio, and a terrific food wine. Sonja says: “It’s an easy drinker, not overpowering. It’s a Cab for people that don’t like as aggressive a Cab as you [I] do.”

**Silverado Vineyards Estate 2013, Napa Valley, (\$40)**

*Available at Costco and will be featured at VinNEBRASKA*

Sonja and I had driven past Silverado Vineyards countless times on our various visits to the Napa Valley before we stopped in. When we finally did this past winter, we wondered what had taken us so long. We spent an afternoon with Jon Emmerich, barrel tasting and listening to him talk about the evolution of the property, where he has been the winemaker for many decades. Instantly, we became fans of Jon’s terrific wines, and while Silverado makes some truly extraordinary high-end Napa Cabs, in particular Solo and Geo, I chose the estate for my list for its extraordinary QPR.

The body of the wine reminded me of time spent on the Silverado Trail, for which the vineyards and winery were named in 1981, the year of my birth, thirty-six years and a day ago now. A familiar depth and richness that my mind associates with only the best of memories was as enticing as it was nostalgic; gentle French oak, refined leather, black fruits such as blackberry, currant, and



black cherry, subtle baking spices, and a certain herbaceous quality commingle beautifully upon a bed of fine tannins. The wine is balanced, structured, and delightful from start to finish. I have no doubt that it is age-worthy, and yet it is drinking so wonderfully now that I’m not sure I have the self-restraint to find out.

**Smith-Madrone 2014, Napa, (\$52)**

*Available at The Winery and will be featured at VinNEBRASKA*

Another of my well-documented winery obsessions is Smith-Madrone. The combination of great memories and terrific wine makes every glass of Smith-Madrone one that I savor. The final winery to find its way onto this list for a second consecutive year, when people visit Napa, I always steer them towards Smith-Madrone, and when people are looking for a great bottle of wine locally, I often point to this one. Founded in 1971 before it was hip to own a winery in Napa, the Smith brothers have been making wine for longer than most people have been drinking it, and it’s no exaggeration to say that they’ve perfected the craft.

The 2014 vintage had an uphill battle to fight, between drought and earthquake, and yet the 42-year-old high elevation vines at Smith-Madrone still bore some truly extraordinary fruit. This wine is, in my opinion, as close to Pauillac as Napa gets, coming in at a low 13.9% ABV and blending 85% Cabernet with 8% Cab Franc and 7% Merlot. Velvety and smooth with concentrated dark fruits and subtle, integrated earthy notes, I find it difficult to imagine a more satisfying Cabernet.

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### **Surh Cellars 2008, Napa, (\$55)**

*Available at The Winery*

I met Don Surh at The Winery, where he was doing a tasting that was open to the public. We chatted for a while, mostly about cooking, and I promised to send him some morel mushrooms, a covenant that I struggled to make good on but ultimately with some effort was able to fulfill. And while normally I attempt to review the current vintage of wines for this list, this was the vintage Dave had on the shelf at The Winery when I bought the bottle there this past year, and so this is the vintage I reviewed.

This is a beautiful wine, so inky-dark in color that I was at first surprised, given the bottle age, that it had not paled much if at all over nine years. I shared it with Sonja, and we were greeted by an amazing nose of deep purple fruits, coffee, and earth. Upon the palate, a Napa Cabernet that was almost velvety in its mouthfeel, reminiscent of an excellent Merlot. Understated at times, I got notes of deep purple and black fruits persisting throughout, with hints of cinnamon spice, mushrooms, earthy notes, cedar, and English tea leading into a long dry finish.

### **Varozza 2012, Napa Valley, (\$85)**

*Available at Corkscrew Wine and Cheese*

Several months ago, I helped to put on an event at Corkscrew that we called "VivinOmaha" where we encouraged people to come and use the Vivino app to rate wine as we tasted through a vertical of Varozza Cabernet, running from 2006 to 2012. I had visited Varozza in the past, their historic winery and terrific hospitality instantly making me into a believer. The event was a lot of fun, and of course everyone was truly impressed with the wines. From that tasting, this one emerged as my favorite.

The Varozza 2012 Cabernet is, as one somm-friend of mine put it, "just a beautiful expression of the varietal." More than that, it's got a sense of place. The small estate vineyard on the ancient Varozza property, tended by Jack Varozza, produces sought-after fruit that, in this bottle, has been turned into a dark, bold, and extremely well-balanced Cabernet. I appreciate that Varozza releases their wine with substantial bottle age, though I have half a case of this in my cellar and, having tasted older vintages of Varozza, I plan to let it age a bit longer.

### **Yount Ridge 2014, Napa Valley, (\$96)**

*Available at The Omaha Wine Company*

I'd never seen this producer before the Omaha Wine Company show this past spring, but from the moment I tasted their Cabs I realized they were one I wanted to become more intimately acquainted with. Relative newcomers to the Napa Valley, and especially to the Omaha wine scene, Yount Ridge's winemaker, Celia Welch of Scarecrow fame, is rapidly making an incredible impression. Like Jean Hoefliger's The Debate wines, when you consider what the winemaker and fruit could command, you recognize quickly that this wine is not only extraordinary, but also boasts a great QPR.

The wine has an indefatigable structure, supported like a marionette by beautiful, fine-grain tannins that hide seamlessly within, doing all of the work without drawing attention to themselves. A nose of subtleties, including blackberry and hints of cinnamon, leads into a beautiful, full-bodied wine with a profile of leather and pipe tobacco, baking spices, dark cherry, plum, and blackberry. At the end, a faint touch of vanilla leads into a long, lingering finish that never seemed to be entirely gone

from my mouth before the next bite of steak made it in. As age-worthy as any wine I've tried recently, it's drinking beautifully right now, but will surely reward your patience if you let it sit for a few more years.

So that's it, another year of suckling at the teat of Dionysus reduced merely to words upon a page. I tried to narrow nearly five hundred Cabs from 2017 down to twenty-two that I hoped my Cab-loving readers would fall in love with as much as I did. From the usual suspects like California and Washington, to lesser-known wine regions in Minnesota, South Dakota, and Virginia, there's a glut of really good Cabernet being made in this great nation, and I'm trying to help sort out the standouts, to separate from so many great wines that are available those which I believe are truly extraordinary and special. The above is my attempt at continuing that endeavor. Thanks for reading it.

Please check out the local Omaha establishments who carry these wines, or order direct from the winery online to support these great producers. As the winter bears down, I hope some Cabernet will be equal to keeping us all a little warmer, the perfect pairing with anything from a grass-fed Sandhills filet to a rousing round of Settlers of Catan or, for the more daring, Cards Against Humanity. Whatever you're pairing it with, enjoy these American Cabernets for all that they have to offer. And should you find one you especially like, as always, I'd love to hear from you. Cheers!

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