California

- Chardonnay for Burgundy lovers
- New names in Napa
- The pinnacles of Pinot
- Is 2013 the greatest Cabernet vintage ever?
- Eating out in wine country
Deconstructing Sonoma

A fascinating region with 400+ wineries, Sonoma is worth getting to grips with. Jordan Mackay offers an overview of its AVAs, wine styles and leading producers.

WHEN IT COMES to wine, Sonoma county is a land of contradictions. It’s both hot and cold. It’s both dry and lush. It’s both tradition-bound and progressive. These oppositions can be simultaneously true because, of all California’s many winemaking counties, Sonoma is the most sprawling, disorganised and diverse. All told, Sonoma contains 25,000ha (hectares) of vines, the second highest total in the state (after a Central Valley county that grows mostly bulk wine). It is home to more than 400 wineries and holds 17 AVAs (American Viticultural Areas) — some tiny and specific, others so laughably large as to be practically meaningless. So the obvious question is: how does one make sense of this vast, complicated, seductive land? It’s not easy, but consider this article an attempt to get you up to speed on the most relevant facets of California’s most tantalising and yet opaque wine region.

First, key to understanding Sonoma’s occasionally confounding personality is one tautological fact: Sonoma is not Napa. Only a low-lying mountain range divides the two, but the psychological differences are huge and meaningful. I asked Jasmine Hirsch, a vintner on Sonoma’s remote, Pacific coast, if she feels isolated or if she bears a connection to Sonoma County as a whole. Her answer could
more money to put into its vineyards, into marketing, into winemaking. Therefore it attracts more of the viticultural talent and invests more in its vineyards; while we don't have the resources for it. I love it here, but that can be a vicious cycle.

However, there are signs that the sleeping giant is waking. Healdsburg, which anchors northern Sonoma County, is now California's most chic wine country town, with boutiques and restaurants surpassing anything in Napa. Likewise, some big wine developments are bringing Napa-like spending on vineyards, upping the game in Sonoma. Furthermore, California's biggest wine story in the last 15 years has been the emergence of powerful, racy Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from the Sonoma Coast. This development has even attracted vintners from Napa to establish Pinot projects on the coast. Buoyed by several good vintages - 2012 and 2013 were even, concentrated and plentiful; 2014 had lower yields, but offered luscious fruit in an early-drinking style - today Sonoma is prized to grow faster than it ever has. Below are overviews of Sonoma's most relevant regions to help explain the current thinking of this gorgeous, sumptuous, maturing place.

**Sonoma Coast AVA**

I'm going to get this over with, so it doesn't bog us down: the Sonoma Coast AVA is a joke. As Hirsch pithily says, "It's a marketing fantasy, not driven by soil, climate or viticulture."

Indeed, it encompasses over 2,000km², making it the largest AVA in Sonoma County, and takes in parts of five other AVAs. It was created to allow wineries with grapes in disparate vineyards to blend them and still label the wines "estate bottled." Not a terrible thing in itself, but by creating an AVA for this (instead of calling such wines Sonoma County), the coast was robbed of its coastliness.

The name Sonoma Coast conjures images of pounding waves, windy cliffs and chilly ocean air; yet in truth the appellation includes areas over 60km inland whose average summer highs are 12°C higher. Many vintners use the appellation to cover wines that blend cheaper fruit from warmer areas with more expensive fruit from actual coastal vineyards. However, other producers bottle their single-vineyard wines from coastal sites this way. This means it can be hard to discern true coastal wines from those grown inland. Nowadays, the designation "Sonoma Coast" on a label indicates a basic, entry-level wine for many producers. Nevertheless, some of these Sonoma Coast blends can be excellent value. Pax Mahle Wines, Kutch Wines and Patz & Hall all make worthy examples.

---

*Speak for all Sonomans: 'I always identify as Sonoma, because we're not Napa.'

Though the two have much in common, Napa is Sonoma's foil. Geographically, Napa is concise and linear, while Sonoma is sprawling and confusing. Whereas Napa is known for one wine, Cabernet Sauvignon, Sonoma is known for diverse wines, from Pinot Noir to Zinfandel to Syrah and Cabernet. While Napa has been populated by a wealthy and glamorous set, Sonoma has remained true to its down-home, farmer spirit. Napa's success is driven by boundless ambition; Sonoma's languor by agrarian humility.

Culturally, one gets the feeling this is how Sonomans would like things to stay, though there are consequences to inertia. Being Napa's opposite can continuously trap Sonoma in a somewhat negative feedback loop. The perception is that Napa's better because of its money, its fame, and its higher wine prices," says Morgan Twain-Peterson of Sonoma's Bedrock Wine Co. 'Because of that, Napa has...
West Sonoma Coast

This is not an official AVA, but hopefully soon will be, since an appellation is much needed to describe what are arguably Sonoma’s most exciting family of wines. Usually Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, they come from vineyards on the narrow band of ridges hugging the coast, about 5-12km inland from the ocean. Wines tend to be riper, brighter, with brisker fruit expression than inland bottles.

An alliance of growers and producers called the WSCC (West Sonoma Coast Vitners) is avidly working to have this appellation made official, though a couple of obstacles remain. The main hurdle, according to WSCC president and owner of Red Car Wine, Carroll Kemp, is the name, which the Government insists should have historical precedent. ‘West Sonoma Coast, apparently, doesn’t have a history of usage here,’ says Kemp. He invites you to send in any ideas to the WSCC.

There’s something else you should know about the ‘True’ Sonoma Coast. Yes, it’s cooler than inland appellations. However, not all cool is created equal. Here, altitude has a greater impact on climate than proximity to the sea. Wines that sit on hills from 250-550m above sea level are above the fog line and are far sunnier and warmer than their fog-bound neighbours below. This results in wines with richer fruit, higher alcohol and bigger body. ‘Call my McDougal Ranch Pinot Noir my “hot-climate” wine and Fatstaff Vineyard my “cool-climate” one,’ jokes Jamie Cutch, even though the two are only 4km apart.

Vineyards in the central Sonoma Coast area of Fort Ross-Seaview—including Flowers, Fort Ross and Jirsch—are higher up. Those in the northern Sonoma Coast (anchored by the town of Ang-win) and in the south around Occidental and Freestone are lower, and further inland in cooler air. Viticulture is riskier here because of the temperature and disease pressure from meso-air. Poor Vineyards makes excellent Pinot Noir, Syrah, Chardonnay and Rhône whites from the Annapolis area. Examples from the south include Freestone Vineyards and Unop’s Petaluma Gap. In time, the names of these towns will become more important for the style of cool climate they represent.

Petaluma Gap

An area of Sonoma that rivals the true coast in excitement is the Petaluma Gap in the far south of the county. Here an opening in the mountains channels some ocean gales of pre-sun air between the Pacific and the town of Petaluma. The zone, which is not yet an official AVA, extends east past Petaluma where cooling winds off San Pablo Bay exert a similar effect.

Pinot Noir and Chardonnay do very well here, but it was the Clary Ranch Syrah from瓢谷checkers that first etched the name in wine lovers’ lexicon. In some years that wine struggled to achieve 12% alcohol, yet exhibited a full, rich expression of ripeness.

Complex, bruléed and intriguing, it offered a new vision of Syrah in California, paving the way for a number of exciting projects. Notably, winemaker Pax Mafe’s Wind Gap winery produces excellent wines, while other wineries of note include MacPhail Family Wines, Melchoy Ranch, Cobb Wines and Coulter.

Russian River Valley AVA

Not long ago I was lucky enough to share a bottle of 1994 Williams Selyem Olivet Lane Vineyard Pinot Noir. It was glorious — ripe and round, but complex, earthy and piquant—a beautifully balanced Pinot. It’s good to taste such wines occasionally, to be reminded of why wine lovers once got so excited about Pinot Noir.

Above: Ridge’s Lytton Springs Vineyard in Dry Creek Valley is renowned for its 15-year-old wines.

Russian River Valley Pinot Noir. Unfortunately, such fresh, balanced wines are hard to come by now. Today’s typical Russian River Valley Pinot is soft and plummy with crushy, overripe fruit, high alcohol and low acidity, clothed in a plush robe of new oak. The reasons for this change are hard to pin down.

Unquestionably, the Russian River Valley is the world’s most beautiful wine regions. A typical drive follows hills, gently twisting roads past vineyards, vineyards, vineyards. It looks the part, so why the fall-off in the wines? There may be several reasons. First and foremost, intention. It’s quite possible vintners are aiming for an overripe style, as is still popular, and the Russian River Valley is a major destination for wine tourism. But there may be other factors. For one, the appellation has been divided by two expansions in the last 15 years — first by more than 300ha in 2003, followed by a massive 5,500ha expansion in 2011 (at the behest of wine behemoths Ed & Gallo). Another reason for mediocre wines may be that the Russian River Valley is better than most realise. In this so-called Pinot Para ground, grapes can easily ripen 2½ months ahead of Cabernet. Finally, there might just be that much great land. In general the region has a high water table and many of its soils are rich river sediments. Perhaps the rush to cash in has led to a surfeit of young vines growing in areas that are too fertile to make great wine.

That’s not to say there aren’t some wines around with the lean, sculpted profile that appeals to sommeliers. For those, look at names like Porter Creek Vineyards, Inman Family Wines, Freeman and Gary Farrell. Old-school brands such as Dussinger and Rochioli make good wines. Too. Finally it would be remiss not to mention the Russian River Valley’s history of sparkling wine. Delicious bubbly is still produced here by Iron Horse Vineyards and J Vineyards & Winery.

Dry Creek Valley AVA & Alexander Valley AVA

Two of the most famous AVAs of Sonoma are also its most stately. If most of the trendy, sexy stuff is happening in the southern and western reaches of the county, these two AVAs in the north and eastern portion are where much has stayed the same. Both Dry Creek and Alexander Valleys share a hot and dry climate, where ripening grapes is never a problem. Thus these two areas are associated with the full-blown, jammy, generous wines that helped make California’s reputation.

Dry Creek Valley is renowned for its white wines. Russian River Valley Pinot Noir. Unfortunately, such fresh, balanced wines are hard to come by now. Today’s typical Russian River Valley Pinot is soft and plummy with crushy, overripe fruit, high alcohol and low acidity, clothed in a plush robe of new oak. The reasons for these changes are hard to pin down.

Unquestionably, the Russian River Valley is one of the world’s most beautiful wine regions. A typical drive follows hills, gently twisting roads past vineyards, vineyards, vineyards. It looks the part, so why the fall-off in the wines? There may be several reasons. First and foremost, intention. It’s quite possible vintners are aiming for an overripe style, as it is still popular, and the Russian River Valley is a major destination for wine tourism. But there may be other factors. For one, the appellation has been divided by two expansions in the last 15 years — first by more than 300ha in 2003, followed by a massive 5,500ha expansion in 2011 (at the behest of wine behemoths Ed & Gallo). Another reason for mediocre wines may be that the Russian River Valley is better than most realise. In this so-called Pinot Para ground, grapes can easily ripen 2½ months ahead of Cabernet. Finally, there might just be that much great land. In general the region has a high water table and many of its soils are rich river sediments. Perhaps the rush to cash in has led to a surfeit of young vines growing in areas that are too fertile to make great wine.

That’s not to say there aren’t some wines around with the lean, sculpted profile that appeals to sommeliers. For those, look at names like Porter Creek Vineyards, Inman Family Wines, Freeman and Gary Farrell. Old-school brands such as Dussinger and Rochioli make good wines. Too. Finally it would be remiss not to mention the Russian River Valley’s history of sparkling wine. Delicious bubbly is still produced here by Iron Horse Vineyards and J Vineyards & Winery.

Dry Creek Valley AVA & Alexander Valley AVA

Two of the most famous AVAs of Sonoma are also its most stately. If most of the trendy, sexy stuff is happening in the southern and western reaches of the county, these two AVAs in the north and eastern portion are where much has stayed the same. Both Dry Creek and Alexander Valleys share a hot and dry climate, where ripening grapes is never a problem. Thus these two areas are associated with the full-blown, jammy, generous wines that helped make California’s reputation.

Dry Creek Valley is renowned for its white wines. Russian River Valley Pinot Noir. Unfortunately, such fresh, balanced wines are hard to come by now. Today’s typical Russian River Valley Pinot is soft and plummy with crushy, overripe fruit, high alcohol and low acidity, clothed in a plush robe of new oak. The reasons for these changes are hard to pin down.

Unquestionably, the Russian River Valley is one of the world’s most beautiful wine regions. A typical drive follows hills, gently twisting roads past vineyards, vineyards, vineyards. It looks the part, so why the fall-off in the wines? There may be several reasons. First and foremost, intention. It’s quite possible vintners are aiming for an overripe style, as it is still popular, and the Russian River Valley is a major destination for wine tourism. But there may be other factors. For one, the appellation has been divided by two expansions in the last 15 years — first by more than 300ha in 2003, followed by a massive 5,500ha expansion in 2011 (at the behest of wine behemoths Ed & Gallo). Another reason for mediocre wines may be that the Russian River Valley is better than most realise. In this so-called Pinot Para ground, grapes can easily ripen 2½ months ahead of Cabernet. Finally, there might just be that much great land. In general the region has a high water table and many of its soils are rich river sediments. Perhaps the rush to cash in has led to a surfeit of young vines growing in areas that are too fertile to make great wine.

That’s not to say there aren’t some wines around with the lean, sculpted profile that appeals to sommeliers. For those, look at names like Porter Creek Vineyards, Inman Family Wines, Freeman and Gary Farrell. Old-school brands such as Dussinger and Rochioli make good wines. Too. Finally it would be remiss not to mention the Russian River Valley’s history of sparkling wine. Delicious bubbly is still produced here by Iron Horse Vineyards and J Vineyards & Winery.

‘The Russian River Valley is one of the world’s most beautiful wine regions’
Iron Horse Vineyards in Russian River Valley is best known for its range of sparkling wines today continues to turn out worthy wine. Jordan is a good example of how a classic Sonoma brand must evolve to remain relevant, something too few old-school Sonoma vintners have done. In recent years owner John Jordan and winemaker Rob Davis have subtly changed the style of the wine, ditching American oak for French, and increasing the level of intensity through the sourcing of grapes. The results – in both Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay – are, in recent vintages, some of the best wines the iconic estate has produced.

Sonoma Valley, Sonoma Mountain & Moon Mountain
I group these three AVAs together, because they live together down in Sonoma’s south-eastern reaches. Sonoma Valley is the greater district, containing both Sonoma Mountain and Moon Mountain, each small but significant AVAs.

Mackay’s pick of Sonoma

Iron Horse, Classic Vintage Brut, Russian River Valley 2010 93
£47 The Wine Treasury
One of California’s most reliable fizz makers, Iron Horse captures the generosity of Russian River Valley fruit but structures it with zippy acidity and crispness. This brut is 65% Pinot Noir and 33% Chardonnay. Creamy palate of ripe red apples and fresh bread, with a dash of orange zest. Drink 2016-2021 Alc13.5%

Red Car, Chardonnay, Fort Ross-Seaview 2013 92
£34.37 Slannery St Wine Co, WoodWinters
A stalwart of the far Sonoma Coast, Red Car makes a lovely, racy cool-climate Chardonnay from its estate vineyard, planted in 2005 high above the fog line at about 300m, and less than 6km from the Pacific. The wine is fermented in French oak, just 10% of which is new, allowing the wine’s lemony zip to take centre stage. Drink 2016-2020 Alc13.8%

Bedrock Wine Co, Compagni Portis Vineyard White, Sonoma Valley 2014 91
N/A UK www.bedrockwineco.com

A field blend of Gewurztraminer, Trousseau Gris, Riesling, Burger and a few vines that remain unidentified, the historic Compagni Portis Vineyard was founded in 1954. Dry-farmed and organic, it yields less than 15H/ha. The resulting wine is unique: smooth and unctuous with a spine of acidity. Stone fruits and almonds show up among its flavours. Drink 2016-2020 Alc13.8%

Lioco, Chardonnay, Sonoma County 2013 90
£24 Roberson
Lioco brings together Matt Licklider, a former national sales director, and Kevin O’Connor, a former sommelier in Los Angeles. They found a mutual interest in producing a style of Chardonnay that went against the grain of the rich, oaky wines that were popular in the day. This wine has been their mainstay. While not lacking in richness, it’s a steely, racy blend of Chardonnay grapes sourced from different vineyards around Sonoma County. Drink 2016-2020 Alc13.6%

Arnot-Roberts, Clary Ranch Syrah, Sonoma Coast 2013 95
£48 Roberson
When it debuted around 10 years ago, this wine was a revelation for many. From an exceedingly marginal vineyard planted in the heart of the Petaluma Gap wind tunnel, the Syrah barely gets ripe most years. The wine’s alcohol is always low and its acidity high; while its flavours are exotic, mixing savoury and gamey notes with intense florals over peppery dark fruit. Drink 2016-2026 Alc12.5%

Kutch, Falstaff Vineyard Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast 2013 94
£55 Roberson, Vin Cognito
Kutch’s coolest vineyard, Falstaff lies below the all-important fog line, meaning that it develops its flavours via a long, slow crawl towards ripening in the foggy sea air. The expression of this is in the freshness of the cherry-tinged fruit, which is framed by an energetic acidity and enticing floral overtones. Drink 2016-2026 Alc12.1%

Laurel Glen, Vineyard Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Sonoma Mountain 2012 94
N/A UK www.laurelglen.com
Located high up on Sonoma Mountain, this vineyard was first planted to mixed
Created in 2013, Moon Mountain sits on the western slope of the Mayacamas Mountains that divide Sonoma and Napa. For the last couple of generations, the area has been famous for its Cabernet, but it does much more. In the appellation, for instance, is the Monte Rosso Vineyard, a California legend, with its 125-year-old Zinfandel vines on volcanic soils. Also here is Hanzell Vineyard, a visionary project dating back to the 1950s and boasting perhaps the state's oldest Pinot Noir. Last but not least, you can find the Montecillo Vineyard, a beautiful old vineyard with dry-farmed Cabernet dating back to the 1970s. Its wonderfully complex, tight and expressive Cabernet Sauvignon attracted hip producers like Arnot-Roberts and Bedrock, whose interest in turn kept the vineyard from being torn out – a wonderful example of how Sonoma's most progressive elements are helping to preserve its past.

Across the valley from Moon Mountain stands Sonoma Mountain, another important AVA, with a small but power-packed terroir. Its altitude ensures wines of good acidity, and its tradition is to be populated by iconoclasts. 

The altitude of Sonoma Mountain AVA ensures wines of good acidity, and its tradition is to be populated by iconoclasts. Just a few producers call Sonoma Mountain home, but they're all interesting. Laurel Glen Vineyard was established in 1977 and developed a cult following for its dense, powerful, yet graceful Cabernets. Nearby is Benziger Family Winery, one of the state's biggest practitioners of biodynamic viticulture. Not far away is California's bastion of natural winemaking, Coturri Winery, now run by Tony Coturri. Altogether, an interesting cast of characters and wines.

red grapes in the 1880s. In 1968 it was rechristened and replanted to Cabernet Sauvignon. Acclaimed over the years for its burly elegance, complexity and ageability, Laurel Glen in 2012 shows expressive red fruits backed with earthy tones of iron and wet clay. Powerful tannins will resolve over decades. Drink 2018-2035 Alc 14.5%

Ridge, Geyserville, Alexander Valley 2012 94
£35-£40 Hennings, Highbury Vintners, James Nicholson, Jeroboams, Woodwinters

Like its counterpart Lytton Springs (see right), the Geyserville field blend is mostly Zinfandel with smaller amounts of Petite Sirah, Carignan and Mourvedre to give depth, structure and colour. The oldest vines in the vineyard are 130 years old, and Ridge has been making the wine since 1966. Ripe, super-charged flavours of blackberry and plum are surrounded by savoury depths of smoke, herbs and game. Drink 2018-2035 Alc 14.7%

Peay Vineyards, Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast 2013 93
£21.25 Justerini & Brooks

Peay Vineyards sits at the north end of the Sonoma Coast, low enough in the hills to be affected by blasts of fog from the ocean just 6km away. The focus here is on the estate vineyard, which produces 14ha of exemplary Pinot Noir. Made almost entirely from the estate, this is a wine with a sense of place: cherry fruit purity combines with bramble and pine, plus fine acidity and a long, bright finish. Drink 2016-2023 Alc 13.5%

Wind Gap, Sceales Old Vine Grenache, Sonoma County 2013 93
£35 Roberson

With his Wind Gap label, Pax Mahle has created a brand that does everything well, from Chardonnay to Pinot to Syrah to Grenache, with this one being from a dry-farmed vineyard with close to 100-year-old Grenache vines. Fermented with stems and carbonic maceration, the wine has a fresh, black fruit character made complex with pepper and spice notes from the stems and tannin. Drink 2016-2025 Alc 13.75%

Bedrock Wine Co, Pagani Ranch Heritage, Sonoma County 2014 92
£45 The Sampler

Planted in the 1880s, Pagani Ranch is one of Sonoma's most treasured vineyard sites. The planted varieties - Zinfandel, Mourvedre, Petite Sirah, Alicante and many others - are commonly abbreviated simply as 'mixed blacks', as what's important is the site, which produces a wine of rare profundity. While the massive profusion of berry fruits is accompanied by high-toned floral notes, there's elegance in its muscle. Drink 2016-2022 Alc 14.8%

Hirsch, San Andreas Fault Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast 2013 92
£55 Roberson

The Hirsches not only own and operate one of the most famous Pinot Noir vineyards in North America, they produce wonderful wine from it, as well. The San Andreas fault runs just a mile from the property and gives its name to this, Hirsch's flagship blend from its own vineyard's diverse soils. With characteristic earthy red fruit and hints of liquorice, the wine is rounded and energetic. Drink 2016-2023 Alc 13.1%

Ridge, Lytton Springs, Dry Creek Valley, Sonoma 2012 92
£35-£40 Christopher Piper, Harvey Nichols,
SONOMA

In the mid-19th century, the valley below was far more densely planted to grapes than it is now; it was the heart of the California wine industry. Some of these vineyards still survive, dating back as far as the 1880s, and the area in general is steeped in history. Gundlach Bundschu is the state’s oldest family-owned wine producer, while nearby Buena Vista Winery is the state’s oldest commercial winery. Both are worth a visit.

Another piece of history here is the Bedrock Vineyard, 61ha of vines dating to the 1880s. Today it’s farmed and run by Bedrock Wine Co’s Morgan Twain-Peterson, whose father Joel founded (and eventually sold) Ravenswood Winery. Taking after his father, Morgan has become a seeker and steward of old vineyards in California. But the wines he makes from them are anything but outdated. He respects the past and builds off the vines that earlier generations planted, while updating the viticulture and winemaking. He farms with a precision and diligence that has been missing in much of mainstream Sonoma. And he makes wines for the evolving palate of today’s wine drinkers. ‘We put a big focus on freshness,’ he says, noting that he often picks seven to 14 days earlier than most growers around him. ‘But we get flavour development because we work with such old vineyards.’

These wines preserve — indeed, they celebrate — Sonoma’s traditions, yet also embrace the present and the future.

Mackay’s pick of Sonoma continued

From a vineyard planted at the turn of the last century, Ridge’s Lytton Springs is a classic California Zinfandel-based field blend that attains rare structure and depth from the low-yielding concentration of old vines. Rich, dark and powerful with massive plummy fruit garnished by notes of bramble, pepper and mocha. A powerhouse that’s just starting to become approachable.

Drink 2016-2030 Alc 14.3%

Jordan, Cabernet Sauvignon, Alexander Valley 2013
£36.75-£42.30 Hedonism, www.jordanwinery.com
Founded in 1972 with the goal of creating a Bordeaux-style blend that would be enjoyable both in youth and with age, Jordan is a California classic. Despite inherent approachability and elegance, the wines can age for years. Recent evolutions in style and sourcing have made the wine better than ever.

Black cherries and spice are highlights, but the intricate integration of tannin is a feat.

Drink 2016-2024 Alc 13.7%

Littoral, Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast 2013
£39-£42.80 Corking Wines, Hedonism
Any wine made by Ted Lemon is worth trying, but this Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir is a great way to sample his excellence in winemaking if his single-vineyards are too pricey or you want something more approachable younger. This is made mostly from declassified fruit from those sites. Flavours of crisp cherry and rhubarb define the wine, which romps with a juicy energy.

Drink 2016-2020 Alc 13.1%

Stonestreet, Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Alexander Valley 2013
POA Boutinot
Made with grapes from the Jackson Family’s Stonestreet Estate vineyards that crown mountaintops rising from 152-731m over Alexander Valley, the 2013 Stonestreet Estate Cab has an appealing texture, fluidly cruising through the mouth before the wine deposits its gentle, fine and sweet tannins on the back of the tongue. Dark black cherry is the main flavour, with notes of bay and mocha.

Drink 2016-2030 Alc 14.5%

Seghesio, Old Vines Zinfandel, Sonoma County 2012
£36.75-£42.30 Hedonism, Highbury Vintners, WoodWinters
One of California’s great-value wines, Old Vines captures Zinfandel’s oaky, food-friendly balance while still delivering a rich dose of dense, dark fruits. An average vine age of 70 years ensures great concentration and balance. Blueberry and blackberry mingle in a palate flush with spice. A lush texture, with warm, ripe tannins.

Drink 2016-2021 Alc 15%

For full details of UK stockists, see p50

Gundlach Bundschu is the state’s oldest family-owned winery

Jordan Mackay is a writer specialising in wine and food. He is co-author of the book Secrets of the Sommeliers