Californian CABERNET
2015: 'Deeply fruited and classically styled'

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Vintage report

California Cabernet 2015

A surprisingly uniform vintage across the region, with smaller volumes but exceptional quality. Linda Murphy selects the best wines to buy

NEARLY 650KRM SEPARATE California’s northernmost quality Cabernet Sauvignon region, Lake County, and Santa Barbara County’s Happy Canyon appellation is in the far south. What are the chances of near-mirror vintage conditions throughout a state that is larger and more diverse than many countries? Well, in 2015 that chance was nearly 100%, with the vast majority of producers using very similar words to describe the vintage. These words were: ‘early’, ‘one of the coolest Mays on record’, ‘five consecutive years of drought’, ‘low-yielding vineyards’, ‘more labour required’, ‘meticulous sorting’.

While it’s not a year for accountants, winemakers are both giddy and relieved at the quality and concentration of their wines, which are now being released.

From north to south, California’s Cabernet Sauvignon producers faced similar conditions in 2015 and had virtually the same result: exceptional, concentrated and complex wines but with yield reductions of 10% to 60%. Because of the dearth of stock, several wineries have already released 2016 Cabernets to keep the cash flowing.

The bottom line: Impatient drinkers will enjoy these deeply fruited, flavour-packed,

‘While it’s not a year for accountants, winemakers are both giddy and relieved at the quality and concentration of their wines’

Murphy’s top 40 California Cabernets

Wines from the 2015 vintage, listed by region

Napa Valley

Kapcsandy Family Winery, Grand Vin, Yountville 95
N/A UK www.kapcsandywines.com
Pure, focused, refined and energetic; it’s hard to believe this came from such an intense vintage. The family’s St. Helena Vineyard is the source of their red grapes, and Merlot adds suppleness. Black raspberry, Asian spice, modest oak, firm acid and tannin backbone, with a juicy, zesty finish, make it a joy to drink now and well into the future. Drink 2020-2032 Alcohol 14%

Cardinal 94
ET166-2230 (2014) Craig Richmond Show, Paar Vinters, Grand Vin, Millesima
It’s there Napa Cab that drinks beautifully on release and then through a decade or more. Decadently plush and juicy, with lifted floral aromas and smooth, seamless tannins. This sports great varietal character and palate, with oak, ripeness, acidity and alcohol all in balance. Drink 2019-2029 Alc 14.7%

Inglenook, Rubicon, Rutherford 94
N/A UK www.inglenook.com
Owner Francis Ford Coppola has a gem with winemaker Chris Phillips, formerly of Swanson Vineyards, Dominus and Petrus. He joined in 2016, working with Château Margaux’s Philippe Baroux to revolutionise the Cab. The Cabs are fresher, more elegant and balanced; this 2015 is firstly and generous, without being extracted. Drink 2019-2032 Alc 13.5%

Lokoya, Spring Mountain District 94
Credit high-elevation grape-growing for this tightly wound, almost brooding wine under which lurks succulent, vibrant wild berry fruit and lively acidity to match. Impeccably balanced for its size, it still begs to be cellar-aged for at least five years and decanted. Still, it’s the most approachable of the four Lokoya Cabs from the mountains. Drink 2020-2045 Alc 14.5%

Newton Vineyard, Yountville 93
E224-8754 (2014) Justin & Brooks, Christopher Keller
Of Newton’s three AVA-specific Cabernets, the Yountville is the most impressive at this stage. Fresh lavender and dried herb aromas get a smoky-oak accent, while the palate offers

[continued on next page]
cool blue and black fruit, with less chocolate oak than the nose suggests. Polished, pure and complete. Drink 2020-2031. Ac 14%

Pine Ridge Vineyards, Stags Leap District 93
$152.99 (2016) Liberty Wines
Small amounts of Petit Verdot and Malbec add dimension to this rich, powerful wine that wears its alcohol well. It’s ultra-vibrant in its wild blackberry character, with a lingering, juicy finish. Tobacco leaf and spicy oak on a firm tannic structure. Drink 2021-2034. Ac 14.8%

Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars, Fay, Stags Leap District 93
$150-159 (2014) Hedonists, Latimer Vintners
The most polished of the producer’s top-tier Cabernets, this is supple and mouthfilling, with a backbone to support the richness. Layers of briny blackberry, cedar, sandalwood and spice unfold. Drink 2020-2030. Ac 14.9%

Accendo Cellars 92
After selling Araujo Estate and Etude Vineyard, Bart and Daphne Araujo purchased this winery in St Helena and created Accendo. Their 2015 Cab is in the elegant style of Araujo, yet deftly built with less new oak. Pumped dark fruit, hints of chocolate and barrel char, along with lively acidity. Drink 2019-2028. Ac 14.8%

Corison, Sunbasket Vineyard, St Helena 92
Sunbasket Vineyard was planted by André Tchelistcheff in the 1950s. Cathy Corison bought fruit from here for more than a decade before purchasing it in 2015. This Cabernet has deeper fruit aromas and flavors than her estate bottling, with a juicy cherry and blackcurrant core, notes of black olive, forest floor and mint, judicious oak and lively acidity. Drink 2020-2032. Ac 14%

Pride Mountain Vineyards, Vintner Select 92
N/A UK www.pridewines.com
Pride’s vineyards straddle both Napa and Sonoma. This mid-tier wine comes from the Napa side of the Mayacamas. Bright, curranty fruit, paired with creamy oak, polished tannins and nervy acidity are its hallmarks. Drink 2019-2030. Ac 14.5%

 Realm Cellars, The Bard, Stags Leap District 92
$300-325 (2016) Grump Richardson Shaw, Fin & Race, Four Corners, Turtle Valley Wines
Realm has taken over the former Hartwell winery, yet winemaker Benoit Touquenq remains. Physically it’s a work in progress, though the 2015 Cabs are splendid. The Bard is classically styled 2015s now. But put them away for a decade or more and be richly rewarded. 2016 is definitely the time to buy, before stocks run out.

Lake County
Napa Valley’s neighbour to the north has been steadily building a positive reputation for Cabernet Sauvignon in its Red Hills AVA. Obsidian Ridge in particular has made focused Cabernets with volcanic-soil-driven dark fruit character and savouriness, despite the challenges of the area’s wild fires.

Winemaker Alex Betka says: “The 2015 valley fire, which scorched 30,756ha, began only a few miles south of our vineyard. The start of the fire coincided with our first day of harvest. We were able to get our first load…

Above: Cliff Lede Vineyards, located in Napa Valley’s Stags Leap District

Chappellet, Signature 90
N/A UK www.chappellet.com
Chappellet makes a more decanted Cabernet Sauvignon, yet this one stands out for its lively berry fruit, subtle herbal notes and measured barrel spice and toast character. Reasonably priced for the quality. Drink 2020-2027. Ac 14.5%

Cliff Lede, Stags Leap District 90
$190-205 (2016) Fin & Race, Richardson Shaw, Grump, Turtle Valley Wines
Lede produces several Cabs with fanciful names, though this flagship can be counted on year after year for its textbook Stags Leap character, with crushed blackberries, graphite and incense notes. Subtle minerality and toasty oak complete the package. Drink 2021-2028. Ac 15%

Gallo Winery, Napa Valley 90
$190-205 (2016) Fin & Race, Richardson Shaw, Grump, Turtle Valley Wines
Owner and winemaker Rosemary Cakebread adores Cabernet Franc and blends a good amount of it into this wine. The Franc lends floral aromas and a brightness to the concentrated and dense palate, with a subtle creaminess and forest-floor, savoury edge. Approaching now. Drink 2020-2028. Ac 14.3%

seamless and rewarding, with vibrant wild berry fruit and oak notes, plus potent acidity. Definitely a producer to watch. Drink 2020-2029. Ac 14.5%

Robert Mondavi Winery, Reserve To Kalon Vineyard, Oakville 92
N/A UK www.robertmondaviwine.com
The seductive cassis nose is accented by hints of campfire and forest floor. Blackberry, blueberry and black raspberry fruit alongside black peppercorn and baking spice. Siney tannins pleed for agiging. Drink 2023-2033. Ac 14.5%

Staglin Family Vineyard, Rutherford 92
N/A UK www.staglinfamily.com
The vintage produced pretty floral aromas alongside the black fruit. Inviting and delicious in its youth, it has enough stuff going to the distance for a decade or more, with firm tannins, juicy acidity and beautifully ripe black cherry, plum and blackcurrant fruit. Not a blockbuster by Napa standards, yet delivers the goods in a balanced serving. Drink 2019-2032. Ac 14.5%

St Supery, Rutherford Estate Vineyard 91
N/A UK www.stsupery.com
The addition of a Rutherford vineyard has lifted this producer’s Cabernet game significantly. Invitingly floral on the nose, it offers perfectly ripe dark cherry and berry flavors, judicious oak and mature tannins. California-generous, with a fresh finish. Drink 2020-2030. Ac 14.5%

Impatient drinkers will enjoy these flavour-packed 2015s now. But put them away for a decade or more and be richly rewarded.
VINTAGE REPORT: CALIFORNIA CABERNET 2015

Right: Alex Beloz, Obsidian Ridge

Mt Brave, Mt Veeder 90
175-180 (2014) Full, Hedonism
A brambly, Zinfandel-like fruit intensity that
comes from relatively new plantings (1999 to
2008). New French oak lends toast and spice
notes, plus dark chocolate and liquorice. Intense
and very young. Drink 2021-2033 Alc 14.5%

Ramsey Wine Cellars, Annum 90
N/A UK www.ramseywines.com
David Ramsey's proprietary red blend is polished
and plump, with juicy red fruits, a medium- to
full body and supple texture. Not too soft as it is
tightly integrated and seamless, this is a
pleasure to drink now and will be for another 10
years. Drink 2019-2029 Alc 14.5%

Raymond Vineyards, Reserve Selection 90
E34-50 E36-42 Carboy Wines, East, Density Wine
Deeply fruited and concentrated, this is a showy
wine, sure to please many with its richness,
chocolate-covered cherry profile and hints of
liquorice and tar. Varietal complexity comes
through in leafy herbs and cedar. It's modern,
for sure. Drink 2019-2026 Alc 14.5%

Signorello 90
N/A UK www.signorellowines.com
This winery was destroyed in the 2017 Napa
wildfires, yet it lives on through this wine, which
was safely stored in a warehouse. It’s classic
Signorello, with oak framing the bold black and
blue fruit. Muscular and dense now, it will likely
benefit from cellaring. Drink 2021-2031 Alc 14.5%

Spottswoode Estate, St Helena 90
POB Four Walls, Hardford, Hedonism
This iconic, organic estate has undergone
repaintings, with vines becoming ripper and
richer as a result of the new non-viral rooted vines.
Yet the Spottswoode signature remains in

Napa Valley

'It was a pretty good year until fruit set,'
recalled Chris Carpenter, winemaker for
Becken's Family Wines. 'At Jota, Lekova, Mt
Browe and Carinbrande Brandons. We got some rain
and cool temperatures and lost about 30% of
our crop. But the rest of the season played out beautifully and the wine quality is
outstanding. We just don't have a lot of it.'

Carpenter's Cabernet Sauvignon grapes are
grown largely in the cooler, hillside vineyards
in the elevated Diamond Mountain, Howell
Mountain, Spring Mountain and Mt Veeder
AVAs, where ripening comes late in the season.
Yet at Francis Ford Coppola's Ingelechook, in the
warmer, Ritter Rutherford AVA, winemaker
Chris Phelps had all his Cabernet Sauvignon
fruit in the cellar by 24 September.

'For Rubicon and the Estate Cabernet, we're
looking for elegance, and while warm September weather had us finishing harvest early, the
grapes didn't suffer any dehydration.'

Napa Valley

'We got some rain and cool
temperatures and lost about 30% of
our crop. But the rest of the season
played out beautifully'

Chris Carpenter

(above)
this Cab's perfume, fried fruit, supple tannins and oak spice. The acidity is a marvel for such a warm site. **Drink 2020-2030 AIC 14.5%**

**CADE, Howell Mountain**
N/A UK www.cade.com
Luxurious texture, with Jimmy’s blackberry and dark cherry fruit making this a thoroughly modern Cab. Lavender, chocolate, espresso and pepper are among the many descriptors for this extravagant wine. **Drink 2019-2026 AIC 15.2%**

**Far Niente, Oakville**
1404-530 Club & Cty, Cooking Wines, Great Wines Direct, Wine Pool
More ripe and extracted than in past vintages, this remains a balanced rendition of modern Napa Valley Cab. A hint of earthy sweetness prevails, though the texture is supple with mature tannins. It speaks to the vintage – a thing not at all Cade Cabor. **Drink 2019-2026 AIC 14.5%**

**Lail Vineyards, J Daniel Cuvee**
1205 Poor Comers Wine
This wine comes from Rob’s Lail, descendant of Inglenook founder Gustave Niebaum. It’s heavily reliant on smoky, chocolatey oak and ripe dark fruit, made in a soft, supple style that has many fans. The finish is surprisingly fresh and long. **Drink 2019-2026 AIC 15%**

**Frog’s Leap Winery, Rutherford**
$35-535 AG Wines, Berry Bros & Rudd, Eton Vintners, Highclere Vintners, Noble Green, Raffles Fine Wine, Somerfield
I admire this winery’s commitment to producing varietally true, lower-alcohol, unfussy organic Cabs that belong on the dinner table. Herbaceous and crisp. It’s a fruity option in a sea of supercharged Cabs. **Drink 2020-2025 AIC 15.5%**

**Quintessa, Rutherford**
$1100 The Wine Treasury
Soft in structure and warm in ripe red fruit, it’s a crowd-pleasing style that cannot be dismissed in the US. Coaxing tannins and a gentle herbal inflection add interest to this drink-now wine. **Drink 2019-2024 AIC 14.5%**

**Sonoma County**
Cornell Vineyards, Estate
N/A UK www.cornellwineye.com
An exceptional Sonoma Cab that’s still finding its strengths. Consulting winemaker Francoise Peschon, formerly of Araujo, has focused on improvements in the vineyard, which show in the glass. This is precise, beautifully textured and elegant, with dark, mountain-grown fruit, graphite and game, enlivened by **

Philips adds: 'The 2015s are a bit more opulent than we’d like, but they still have freshness. A splash of Merlot blended in the Rubicon gave us less extraction.'

John Conover, who oversees operations for CADE on Howell Mountain, PlumpJack Winery in Oakville and Odette Estate in Stags Leap District, produced a hedonistic style of Cabernet Sauvignon that is very popular in the US. ‘We had some issues, but the wines are pure, unctuous and give immediate satisfaction.’

**Sonoma County**

Pride Mountain Vineyards winemaker Sally Johnson has a unique perch in the Mayacamas Mountains that separate Sonoma and Napa counties. Her vineyards straddle this county line, with bottles labelled accordingly. ‘2015 had a little bit of everything,’ remembers Johnson. ‘Hail, drought, a cool, wet May and a fog-like cloud that stayed for two weeks. Hail and wind knocked clusters off the vines. But in the end the wines came out great, something in the middle of 2012’s softness and balance, and 2013’s tannic structure. It was certainly a riper year than 2011, though we called 2015 a “zombie harvest” because it wouldn’t end. With uneven ripeness, we made numerous passes through the vineyards.’

Chris Louton of St Francis Winery & Vineyards in Sonoma Valley, noted the light harvest in 2015, which began at a record-early date for the winery of 10 August. The result was smaller, heavier clusters, he says, though the warm, consistent summer delivered healthy grapes, though at less-than-desirable quantities.

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**We called 2015 a “zombie harvest” because it wouldn’t end**
Sally Johnson, Pride Mountain Vineyard (above)
Garden Creek’s Justin and Karin Waremullis-Miller

‘One silver lining is the very high quality of reds. Colour densities are the highest I’ve seen in more than a decade’

Jeff Meier, J Lohr Vineyards & Winery (below)

Santa Cruz Mountains

Late spring storms and cool weather slashed yields here by 20% to 50%, yet quality didn’t seem to suffer. Eric Baugh, chief operating officer for Ridge Vineyards, reported that production of Monte Bello Cabernet Sauvignon and Estate Cabernet Sauvignon was down. ‘But what’s great about this vintage is the quality,’ he says. ‘It’s one of the finest I’ve seen in my lifetime at Ridge. Beautiful, intense flavours and aromas in the berries. No heat spikes during summer. The vines cruised through harvest.’

Paso Robles

On the Central Coast, it can be so hot in some vintages that, in the wrong hands, Cabernet Sauvignon can resemble Port – with alcohol levels to match. But 2015 was not such a year. ‘Drought and unusually cold, windy, cloudy weather in May greatly impacted berry set,’ explains Jeff Meier, president of Lohr Vineyards & Winery. ‘In many respects, 2015 is reminiscent of 2004 in terms of crop...’

structured tannins and acidity. It’s so fresh and certainly a refreshing style for California Cab. Drink 2020-2030 Alc 14.5%.

Garden Creek, in Texanae, Alexander Valley 92
N/A UK www.gardencreekvineyards.com
An under-the-radar Sonoma winery, where owners Justin and Karin Waremullis-Miller do nearly all the work themselves. Their Cabs are seamless, refined and supremely age-worthy. Rich and energetic, this vintage is ripe dark fruit front and centre, with oak well in the background. Tempting to drink now, but wait.
Drink 2021-2032 Alc 14%

Jordan Winery, Jordan, Alexander Valley 91
N/A UK www.jordanwinery.com
Jordan always swims against the tide, eschewing overt oak and overripeness in the grapes. Their Cabernet is more Bordeaux-like than almost any wine from California, with a reasonable level of alcohol, subtle hints of herbs and spice, and a fresh, clean, mouthwatering profile. Stick it in the cellar for a decade or more.
Drink 2024-2041 Alc 14%

Knights Bridge Estate, Knights Valley 90
N/A UK www.knightsbridgevineyard.com
A relative newcomer in Knights Valley, taking advantage of an impressive array of soil types and row orientations to make this distinctive wine with volcanic, loam and alluvial character. Blackcurrant fruit, savoury earth, and firm yet plump tannins. Drink 2022-2030 Alc 15%

Laurel Glen, Counterpoint, Sonoma Mountain 90
£45 Christopher Keller, Thirty Nine 15 Top Selection
White wines from Laurel Glen’s estate Cab to be released in early 2019. Enjoy this second-tier wine for its spiced dark fruit character and properly earthy, loamy complexity. Solid effort for a second label. Drink 2020-2025 Alc 14.5%

Pedroncelli Winery, Block 007 Estate, Dry Creek Valley 89
N/A UK www.pedroncelli.com
In an age when many CarCab have their savoury character masked by oak and ripeness, this is unabashedly earthy with slightly herbal accents to the dense, dark fruit, and vibrant acidity. Solid value. Drink 2020-2025 Alc 14%

Rodney Strong, Knights Valley 99
£28.50 Waltrip-Celler
This producer continues to expand its Sonoma Cabernet reach, now in Knights Valley, near the Napa border. Toasty oak is evident, yet...
VINTAGE REPORT: CALIFORNIA CABERNET 2015

there is a vibrancy to this good-value wine, with juicy dark fruit and mouthwatering acidity. Drink 2019-2025 Alc 14.5%

St Francis Winery & Vineyards, Moon Mountain District 88
N/A UK www.stfranciswine.com
A mountain vineyard above the valley floor is the source for this heady yet surprisingly balanced wine. Violet, cherries, baked pie crust and bitter sweet chocolate are wrapped in supple tannins. Drink 2020-2025 Alc 15%

Santa Cruz Mountains
Mount Eden Vineyards, Mount Eden Estate 99
90/10 James Nickleman
The rocky minerality of the Santa Cruz Mountains shows from first sniff of this wine through to the lengthy finish. The earthiness on the palate is offset by fresh red and black fruit, with notes of salted caramel, chocolate, espresso and vanilla. For all its youthful intensity, the palate is remarkably fresh and bright. Drink 2022-2035 Alc 14%

Ridge Vineyards, Monte Bello 91
97/3 James Nickleman
Most know Ridge Monte Bello improves with age, so judging it at its infancy is almost unfair. Somewhat herbal American oak dominates the nose, though the black cherry/blackcurrant fruit is the core of this wine, certain to take centre stage over the years. High acidity, low alcohol and fat bit it together. Drink 2025-2040 Alc 13.5%

Paso Robles
Hope Family Wines, Austin Hope 90
N/A UK www.hopetwines.com
A decadent wine, effusive in its cassis, black plum, black olive and forest floor aromas and flavours, with a hint of mint and pomegranate. It's powerful and ripe, yet wears it well, without any discernible heat. Drink 2019-2026 Alc 15%

J Lohr, Signature 90
N/A UK www.jlohr.com
Young, tight and tannic now, though opening with busyness ripe blackcurrant fruit. Varietal notes of cedar and forest floor add complexity, though finishes short. Drink 2021-2035 Alc 14.3%

Santa Barbara County
Star Lane Vineyard, Astral, Happy Canyon 89
N/A UK www.starlaneyard.com
From the warmest part of otherwise cool Santa Barbara comes a turgid, grippy Cabernet with textbook varietal character. Cedar, savoury, vanilla, a hint of vanilla and juicy blackcurrant are all in keen balance. Drink 2020-2025 Alc 14.5%

size and warm growing season. Fortunately, unlike 2004, the weather conditions during veraison were mild. Cabernet Sauvignon yields were down by as much as 60%, with other Bordeaux varieties down closer to 10%. One silver lining is the very high quality of reds. Colour densities are the highest I've seen in more than a decade,” he adds.

Austin Hope, winemaker at Hope Family Wines, says: “We did see some slight drought stress on the vines and had to irrigate more than normal. The berries were a little smaller than usual and this resulted in more concentration in the wines, with higher skin-to-juice ratios.”

Santa Barbara County
This region is best known for Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, given its cooling Pacific Ocean influence. Yet in the far-eastern AVA of Happy Canyon, Bordeaux varieties enjoy the warmer climate. For Tyler Thomas, who makes wines for Dieberg and Star Lane Vineyard, the only bad thing about the 2015 vintage was the cool spring and resultant poor fruit set. “We had clusters on the sorting table that already looked distressed - literally 10 berries per cluster.” That's unfortunate for yields but isn't a quality issue. Our production of Cabernet Sauvignon ended up around 40% of normal, yet the wines are thrilling and energetic with a fresh, coastal, sage herb note.”

Linda Murphy is a co-author of American Wine: The Ultimate Companion to the Wines and Wineries of the United States