

32ND ANNUAL RESTAURANT POLL

RESTAURATIVE POWER

FINDING NOURISHMENT IN A PANDEMIC

Wine & Spirits



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THE HEALING POWER OF RESTAURANTS

BROTH. IT'S PRIMAL. Yet, the healing power of broth may not be the first thing that comes to mind when you ask, tonight, "Where should we eat?"

In 2014, when Marco Canora opened *Brodo*, it was a bone-broth takeout window connecting *Hearth's* kitchen to passersby on First Avenue.

He was selling in New York what the French call a *restaurant*—a restorative broth. When a soup salesman named Boulanger opened for business in 1765, he was selling *restaurants* to his guests. The gathering places soon offered more than broth, even as they kept its name. It was a time when the French were demanding liberty and economic justice; broth, perhaps, was a way for people to care for their own wellbeing, people who had, not long before, been serfs. The restaurant was both the broth and the place where you enjoyed it; It was part of the early healing of the modern social fabric.

That sense of a restaurant, as a gathering place for social and physical nourishment, turned into a vulnerability in

March 2020. A novel coronavirus, imperceptible and deadly, spread on the breath, led to lockdowns across the country. Restaurants were shut down overnight, feared as super-spreader sites.

At *Wine & Spirits*, we immediately canceled our spring tasting event, what was to be a celebration of the most popular wines in restaurants as reported in our Annual Restaurant Poll. And as news came in of permanent closures at legendary dining rooms—including many loyal respondents on our list—we wondered if there would be restaurants to poll in 2021.

It's not news that restaurant closures were a boon to online wine retailers. Wine.com, the leading site, grew its already significant sales by 215 percent from April to September. Many of the sommeliers who managed to keep their jobs shifted to selling wine to go. For most restaurants, wine sales crashed, the fall steeper than in either of the two last recessions (see the chart on page 41). But for some, wine sales actually increased as a percentage of their restaurant's total sales. As Andrew Fortgang of *Le Pigeon* in Portland, Oregon, reports, that didn't mean it was a good year—just that he was able to continue selling wine during the times that the restaurant was effectively closed. And, like others we interviewed, he was able to find creative ways to sell it through the strong network he'd built over a 15-year run.

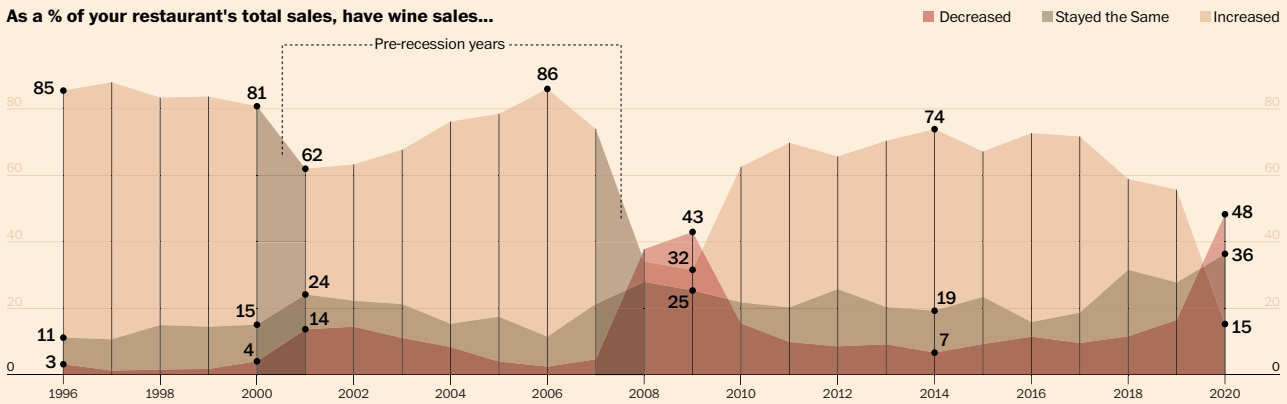
Many chefs and sommeliers, servers and dishwashers, line cooks and bussers, bartenders and back waiters have been furloughed this year as restaurateurs struggle to keep the lights on. The pandemic has led them to completely reinvent their businesses. Some have survived selling meal kits, others have taken their tables to sidewalks, parking lots and barricaded parking spaces. Many welcomed new guests at these sidewalk tables, mostly younger people, those for whom the

CONTENTS

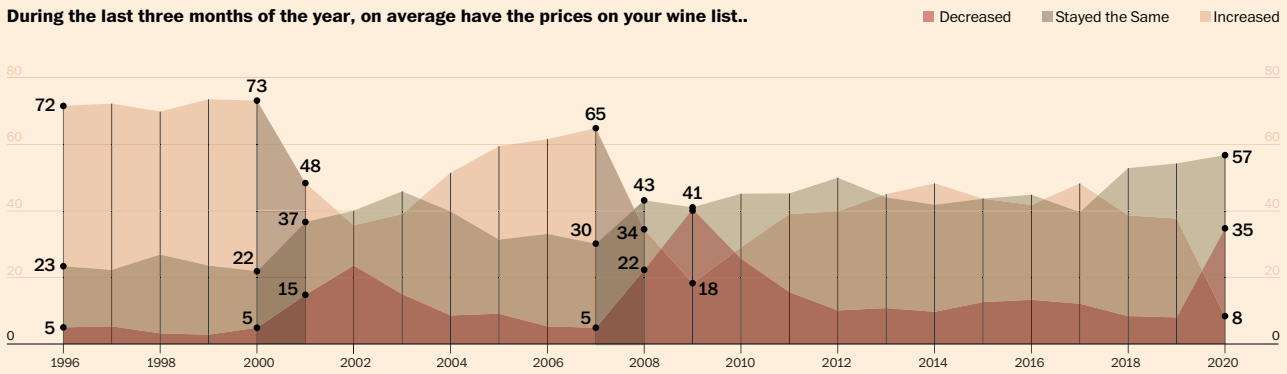
Tracking Sales Trends over the Past 25 Years	41
The Top-Selling Wines of 2020	42
How We Sift the Data.....	43
Wines that Worked, By Season	44
Dispatches from the Front	50
Directory of Participating Restaurants	64

SALES TRENDS OVER THE PAST 25 YEARS

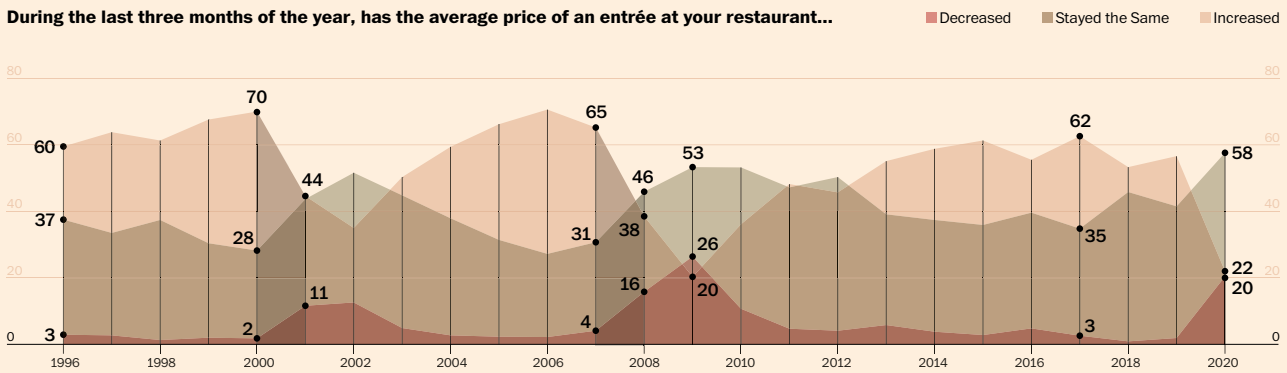
As a % of your restaurant's total sales, have wine sales...



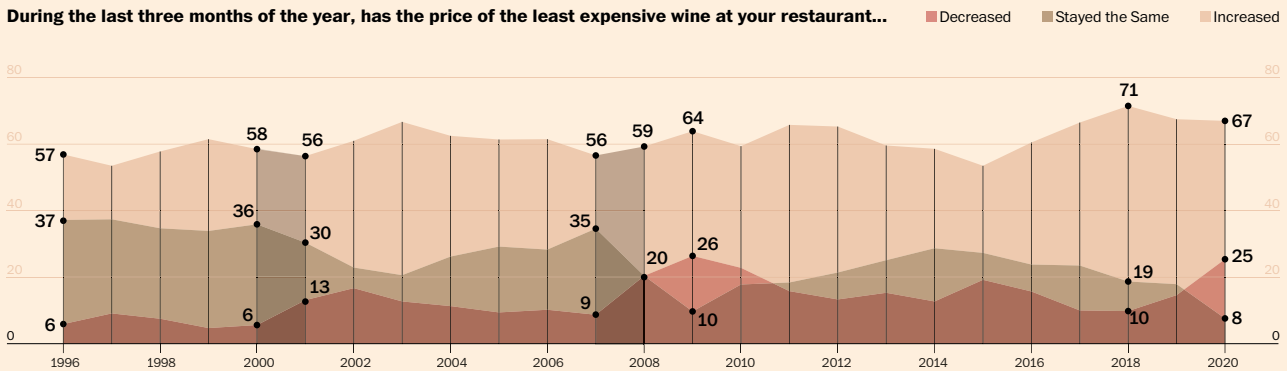
During the last three months of the year, on average have the prices on your wine list..



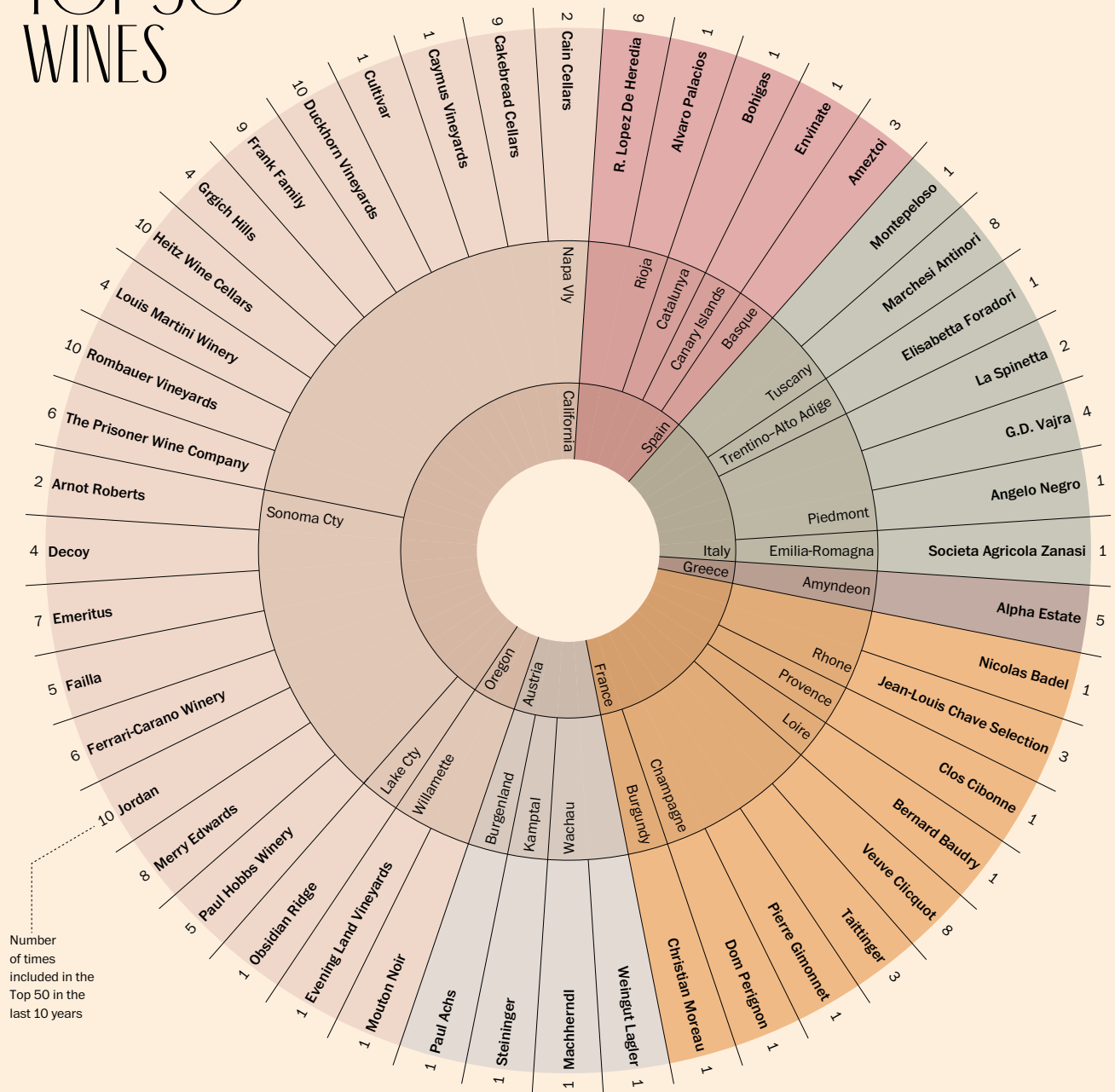
During the last three months of the year, has the average price of an entrée at your restaurant...



During the last three months of the year, has the price of the least expensive wine at your restaurant...



TOP 50 WINES



Number of times included in the Top 50 in the last 10 years

benefits of meeting over a shared meal outweigh the calculated risks.

Some of those guests, just out of college, may have thought of restaurants as a place to work their way through school, or to work while they wrote their first stories, or while they waited for an audition. Others may have understood food and wine as a calling and a career. But few of us, until this year, really understood the central role that restaurants play in our lives and our culture. Sure, there are people who dismiss restaurants as a luxury—or food as any-

thing more than calories to burn. But for those of us who thrive in the warmth of the social fabric restaurants create, sharing a bottle of wine over a Zoom call can be a lovely way to stay connected with friends, but it isn't the same as sharing a bottle in person—or sharing our reactions with the person who helped us choose that bottle.

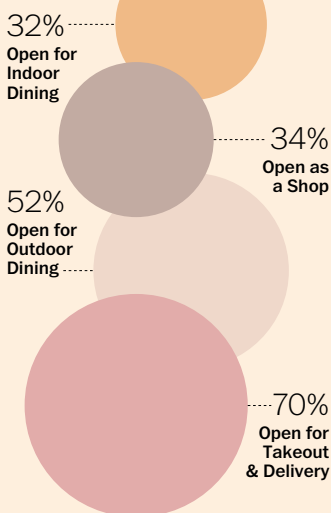
A hug is different from a handshake, a fist bump, elbow tap, Facetime, Zoom, Slack... A good restaurant is a hug. There's no replacing it. Whatever that connection may be that is missing, we hope to find it again soon. ●



COVID-19 IMPACTS

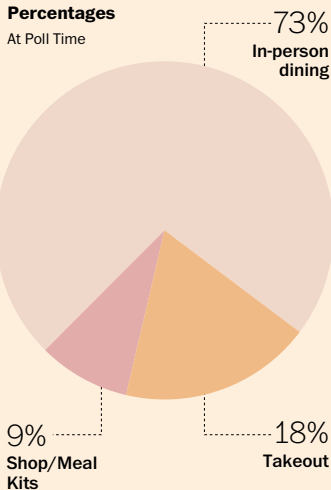
Pivots

At Poll Time



Wine Sales Percentages

At Poll Time



A METHODOLOGY IN THE MADNESS

For three decades, we've taken the temperature of a small community of restaurants, checking in on the state of their business and reporting on the wines they sell. Our poll started when the *Zagat Guide* was a prime resource for tracking restaurants, and we built our early list based on its 40 most popular restaurants in each of the cities it covered. After *Zagat Guide* sold to Google, we shifted our sources, relying on *Eater* Hotlists, trusted local sources and on our own research, but maintained the same premise—searching out the most popular restaurants across the country and asking them to list their ten best-selling wines in the fourth quarter of the year. The poll results are a window into a wine-and-food community, favoring democracy over elitism, honoring cultural appreciation over all-you-can-eatism.

There have been other years when the health of the restaurant industry was challenged by economic pain, but this is the first year when the industry's health was taken down by the country's health.

As we set out to contact restaurants in January, many of those that had persevered through the holidays were taking a hiatus. Evan Hansen, at *Selden Standard* in Detroit, gave his staff the month off, awaiting more lenient restrictions from the state in February. Others, such as NYC's *Balthazar*, had been closed since March. Aware of their varied situations, we did not require participants share their list of best-selling wines, as our goal was to hear from them and to report on the current state of the industry. More than any year in the past, we had a flood of early respondents who jumped at the chance to participate, sharing wine data and stats from their year. Others told us they had no access to data—as they were either working remotely, or not working at all. Others simply declined. "I'd like to forget 2020 altogether," Paul Botamer told us when we called him about *Fearing's* in Dallas.

By our deadline 133 restaurants had answered the poll, with 89 of them providing information on their most popular wines for the fourth quarter of the year. We thank all of them for their courage during the most difficult year for restaurants in our lifetimes. On page 64, you'll find a list of our participants, and we encourage you to seek them out.

We have taken extra care in how we present the data this year. We not only have significantly fewer respondents than in years past, but all of those respondents are working in different ways: indoor, outdoor, takeout, retail and a myriad of combination of all of those. So, rather than ranking our Top 50 Most Popular Wine Brands, we have highlighted the 48 most mentioned brands, presenting them in a circle, by country and region. You'll find stalwarts of the poll, like Jordan, Duckhorn, Heitz and Rombauer, who have made the list ten of the past ten years (in fact, they have made this list for decades). You'll also find newcomers, brands that found an opening in this fractured year.

In the pages that follow, our reporting focuses not only on trends we found in the data—a rise in rosé sales, an interest in chillable reds, the robust strength of cabernet and a focus on inexpensive wines overall. We also report on the creative approaches sommeliers and wine directors have taken to sustain their connections to loyal guests—and the efforts many of these guests have made to sustain their connections with their favorite restaurants. Here's hoping that 2021 will be a better year for all of us.



The fracturing of the restaurant business in 2020 generated myriad reactions and survival strategies; data reported on Top-Selling wines was significantly more diverse than in years past. And with tables moving out into streets, parking lots and sidewalks, the weather played a more important role than ever. Here we report on how restaurateurs responded to initial lockdowns, partial reopenings and unexpected closings throughout 2020, with details on their best-selling wines. Some brands sustained a strong showing in this on-again, off-again year; meanwhile, a lot of new names found success during 2020. We list the brands that accrued multiple mentions, in alphabetical order, by category, on the following pages.

PART I — SPRING TO SUMMER

CREATIVE PIVOT

“REMEMBER THE DAY they said we were shutting down—March 16.” recalls Dan Sbicca of *Sbicca* in Del Mar, California. “I was thinking it would be just a couple of weeks and we’ll reopen again when this dies down. Luckily, my much younger general manager, Amanda, said, ‘We need to be doing to-go.’ She really rolled with it. And the ABC allows us to sell booze to go. It was spring, it was nice out, so our place almost turned into a party place.”

Many people found that strong liquor fit better than wine, given the apocalyptic feel of the moment. At *Jack Allen’s Kitchen* in Austin, TX, David Toby watched his wine sales wither: “Most people have beer and wine at home. I tried to discount wine, but that still didn’t

help.” What did? “Frozens went bonkers, selling by the quart. People were stocking them up in their freezers.”

While the furloughed and the work-at-homers took solace in to-go cocktails, restaurateurs around the country found themselves staring into the abyss. “We just moved into survival mode,” says John Aranza at *Autre Monde Café* in Berwyn, Illinois. “We are a neighborhood three-star restaurant, so what does this all look like for us? We really had to think on the spot.”

For many, there was no effective pivot. At NYC’s *Balthazar*—a grand space and a magnet for tourists—veteran Beverage Director Rebecca Banks recalls how the restaurant attempted takeout and delivery and cocktails to go. “Everyone was trying everything and anything. A lot of people got burned out or got sick. One of the bussers at *Balthazar* died in this spring of COVID. He had been with the company for a very long time.” Keith McNally decided to close *Balthazar* for the duration and closed two of its sister restaurants permanently.

There were bright spots: At *Yono’s* in Albany, New York, Dominick Purnomo reports, “We sold more bottles at \$500 and up for the first three months than we have for the past three years combined.” He believes people wanted something different than the bottles they



NIXTA TAQUERIA, AUSTIN, TX



“We got the most traction with canned cocktails. For a long time, people were just wandering around here because it’s a good walking neighborhood with a lot of outdoor art, so cocktails were a good option.”

—JULIE MASCIANGELO, *IL POSTO*, DENVER, COLORADO

WINES THAT WORKED IN 2020

Here are the brands, by category, in alphabetical order, mentioned most by our respondents this year.

SPARKLING

Dom Pérignon
Champagne
Pierre Gimonnet
Champagne Brut
1er Cru Blanc
de Blancs Cuis
Taittinger
Champagne Brut
La Française

Veuve Clicquot
Champagne Brut
Yellow Label
Champagne
La Grande Dame
Zanasi
Lambrusco Grasparossa
di Castelvetro
Bruno Zanasi
Lambrusco di Sorbara

CHARDONNAY

Jordan
Russian River Valley
Rombauer
Vineyards
Carneros
Christian Moreau
Chablis
Sonoma-Cutrer
Sonoma County
Russian River Ranches



OUTDOOR DINING AT CLAY, NEW YORK



There were several people in one-piece snow suits, like you would see on a mountain, skiing—maybe a little more stylish, as this is New York. I’ve asked them, “Did you buy that this year?” And all of them said yes, because they want to go out to eat. Even though it is twenty degrees out.

—CHRISTINE WRIGHT, HEARTH, NYC

PART III – FALL TO WINTER

INTO THE SURGE

AS SNOW BEGAN TO FALL in the colder climes, restaurateurs raced to find ways of retaining customers. Not everyone was down with winterizing their outdoor structures: As Kevin Bratt, Wine Director at *Joe’s Seafood* in Chicago, points out, once the outdoor space is sealed from the elements, “it’s the same [indoor] space, only outside.”

Even where indoor dining was allowed, not everyone was game. “We ended up opening the dining room in mid-October and then closed it again at the beginning of December,” says Aria Dorsey at *Folk* in Nashville. “We still don’t think that dine-in is the safest option for our guests.” *Folk* has reverted to takeout only, and plans to continue in that mode through mid-March.

Exhausted by the constant challenges, some restaurateurs sent their kitchens into hibernation; others used the time to work on projects they hadn’t had a chance to do before, like Sal

Marino, who renovated the dining room at *Marino Restaurant* in Hollywood. For Tonya Pitts at *One Market* in San Francisco, “It’s been an opportunity to change up and do new things. I’ve found myself getting more involved in mentorship projects, and starting a small consulting company.”

Where outdoor dining simply wasn’t feasible, many restaurants essentially reinvented themselves. At *Manresa* in the Silicon Valley town of Los Gatos, the team began serving “the Manresa Family Meal.” “It’s a translation of what the staff meal normally is—and

WINES THAT WORKED

CABERNET

- Cain Cellars
Napa Valley
Cain Cuvée
- Caymus Vineyards
Napa Valley
- Duckhorn Vineyards
Napa Valley
- Ferrari-Carano
Alexander Valley

- Frank Family
Napa Valley
- Grgich Hills
Napa Valley
- Heitz Wine Cellars
Napa Valley
- Jordan
Alexander Valley
- Louis Martini
Alexander Valley
California

- Obsidian Ridge
Red Hills Lake County
- Obsidian Ridge
Vineyard
- Paul Hobbs Winery
Napa Valley
Crossbarn
Napa Valley
- Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars
Napa Valley
Artemis