

Cold weather and cabernet go mitten in mitten

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By Bill Garlough

Baby it's cold outside! This is a great time of year to stay inside and enjoy a hearty glass of red wine. While there are many wonderful choices of bold red wine, including Ribera del Duero from Spain and the Bordeaux and Rhone wines of France, this column will focus on Napa Valley California Cabernet Sauvignon.

Grape-growing

Cabernet sauvignon is king in Napa. While (red) Zinfandel grapevine plantings have just surpassed Cabernet in numbers, it is cabernet sauvignon that has given Napa Valley international acclaim as a world-class wine region.

There are several reasons why winemakers in Napa are producing extraordinary wines. Cabernet is known for its big style, structure and long-term aging potential. Tannins are the reason behind this, and are found in the cabernet sauvignon dark purple grape skins, seeds and stems.



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Over the years, Napa winemakers have become more skilled at determining when to harvest, based on the grape's ripeness including amount of juice, sugar, acidity and tannins. Oak barrel aging from 18 to 24 months is done to soften the wine and help bring it into focus, creating a balanced, flavorful wine. Oak contributes toasty, vanilla and earthy notes. Well-produced cabernets are lush and rich, with complex flavors of black fruit (blackberry, currant and plum) and notes of cedar wood, leather and cassis.

Napa's cabernet grapevine plantings originally occurred on the valley floor, as the soil is rich with nutrients and has good water retention. Popular American Viticultural Areas (AVAs) include Oakville and Rutherford.

Food pairings

Tannins bind together with protein, enhancing the food's flavor and aiding in digestion. Time softens tannins. A mature wine is softer and considered more elegant. As the wine matures, the tannin molecules bind together to form larger particles. These drift to the bottom of the bottle and are referred to as sediment.

Bill's 2004 California Cab Picks

Cabernet Sauvignon can range in price from \$10 to over \$500 a bottle. My value picks with suggested retails are:
Castle Rock (Napa): \$12
Beaulieu Vineyards (Napa): \$18
Rodney Strong (Sonoma): \$25
Robert Mondavi (Napa): \$27
Duckhorn Decoy (Napa): \$29
Beringer (Napa): \$40
Groth (Oakville): \$41
Chappellet Napa Valley Signature: \$46

Decanting cabernets before drinking is helpful.

Decanting a wine means carefully and slowly pouring the wine from the original bottle into a larger glass vessel or decanter. The sediment usually will come out last, so the person decanting the wine must watch for the sediment and stop pouring when this is visible. It is best to decant at least one to two hours before serving. Decanting also aerates the wine, mixing the wine with oxygen to help "open up" the wine. This allows you to better taste the fruit, complexity and finish of the wine.

A light and fruity style of cabernet pairs well with chicken salad, roast beef sandwiches and proscuitto. Medium weight cabernets complement beef broth-based and mushroom soups, gnocchi or pasta with marinara, pizza and seasoned, roasted chicken. Full-bodied cabernets naturally go with heartier fare such as rib roasts, barbecue, bleu cheese, aged cheddar cheese and dark chocolate desserts. Cabernet sauvignon's quintessential pairing is with steak. Young, tannic cabernets pair well with T-bone steaks. A mature cabernet (older than 5 years) works well with beef tenderloin.

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