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California wine: why the independents rule

An obsession with ripeness made the state's wines like Michael Bay films – crude and overblown. But things are getting better



Up until very recently, if you'd asked me to nominate my least favourite [wine](#) region, the one that I could rely on to provide the most disappointing bottles at the most unattractive prices, the answer would have been [California](#).

With a handful of exceptions, the Golden State, which dominates the USA's output, seemed to represent everything wrong with the wine world. At the top end, it was dominated by overpriced, overhyped cabernet sauvignon. The archetypal Napa cab was the liquid equivalent of a Michael Bay action movie – crude and overblown – and was often sold via exclusive mailing lists to dotcom millionaires and Wall Street traders.

The bottom end was even worse. California's big brands have always seemed uniquely horrible: sweet, syrupy, more "wine-style" drinks than actual wine. And between top and bottom? Very little. When you consider that the state on its own is the world's fourth-largest wine producer, the size of its offering from £8 to £15, or even £20, has long been pitifully small.

Mine isn't a skewed European perspective. In his impressive new book *The New California Wine* (subtitled *A Guide to the Producers and Wines Behind a Revolution in Taste*), one of those critics, Jon Bonné, wine editor of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, sums up the aesthetic that has long prevailed in California as "Big Flavour". It's a neat phrase that, with its echoes of "Big Food", conjures up the glossy corporate feel of too much Californian wine.

Bonné says there has been an obsession with ripeness, with getting as much sugar and fruit flavour into the grapes as possible at the expense of balance and a sense of place. As a result, the wines are impressive in their force of flavour, but too thick to drink more than a couple of sips.

But Bonné has come to praise rather than bury his adopted state, describing the counter-cultural scene that is flourishing in the margins. This disparate set of individuals (which includes producers such as Ridge, Calera and Qupé who have always stood apart from their contemporaries, as well as new names such as Matthiasson, Lioco, the Scholium Project and Arnot-Roberts) has taken a more creative approach to the possibilities offered by the state's varied soil and microclimates.

That approach might entail unusual grape varieties – albariño, ribolla gialla, gamay, refosco, trousseau. It may mean seeking out sites away from what Bonné calls the "bombastic" heartland of Napa Valley – the Sierra Foothills, the Santa Cruz Mountains, Contra Costa County. But it always means working in a more sensitive way, striving for balance rather than pushing the outer reaches of ripeness.

At the moment, many of these names can be hard to find on this side of the Atlantic, although the London merchant Roberson deserves particular credit for its imaginative selection. What has arrived in the UK couldn't be described as cheap either: Americans are prepared to pay much more for their wine than the British, so exporters, with a ready-made domestic market, are reluctant to drop their prices over here. But as the movement gains momentum, I have a feeling we're going to see a lot more of this other side of California – winemakers who, by scaling back, have shown that the region could be the next big – if not "Big" – thing.

Six of the best California wines

Edmunds St-John Bone Jolly Gamay Noir 2010

(£13.95, robersonwine.com)

Gamay is the grape of Beaujolais – hence the rather wince-making pun – and this archetype of the new California is very much influenced by the French region: a vibrant light and succulent red that puts the emphasis on drinkability.

Qupé Syrah Central Coast, 2011

(from £16.99, agwines.com; [Majestic](#))

Qupé driving force Bob Lindquist's wines have always had a more elegant cast than the California norm, and this sinewy, Rhône-like syrah, with its red fruit and black peppery crackle, is no exception.

BEST BUY:

Varnier Wines Foxglove Chardonnay 2011

(reduced to £13.50 from £17.50 until 23 Feb, swig.co.uk)

Pristine, mineral but full of tangy orchard fruit, this incisive, unoaked Californian answer to is as far from the stereotype of big, flabby, buttery West Coast chardonnay as it's possible to get.

Uvaggio Zinfandel, Lodi, California, 2012

(£9.95, [The Wine Society](http://TheWineSociety.com))

Zinfandel can be head-bangingly big and alcoholic, but in the hands of Jim Moore this red has more in common with the sweet-sour cherry and plum juiciness of southern Italy, where the variety is known as primitivo.

Au Bon Climat Chardonnay 2011

(from £20.95, winedirect.co.uk; [Majestic](#))

Like his friend Bob Lindquist at Qupécorrect, Au Bon Climat's Jim Clendenen has always avoided excess in his various pinot noir and chardonnay bottlings, and this oaked chardonnay is perfectly poised between mealy, fruity richness and tensile acidity.

Sean Thackrey Pleiades XXII

(from £30, [Majestic](#), [Roberson](#))

Militantly individual former gallery owner Sean Thackrey has always gone his own sweet way, and this seven-grape red non-vintage blend, with its distinctively exotic nose of herbs, spice, and sappy red fruits is like nothing else around.

<http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/feb/15/california-wine-david-williams>