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Cabernet beyond Bordeaux | California's new cults

Whisky goes into the stratosphere

Top Bordeaux blends from outside Bordeaux

The grape varieties that dominate the Gironde also have a long history in other wine regions of the world. Jane Anson looks beyond the borders for a Cabernet reshuffle

If it's not frustrating enough for other wine regions that Bordeaux hogs the limelight every year with its en primeur campaign, they also have to put up with the fact that any time Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot or Malbec is used in a wine, it gets slapped with the label 'Bordeaux blend'.

The moniker may not be going anywhere soon, because Cabernet Sauvignon continues to be the most widely planted red wine grape in the world, with a total of 340,000ha (840,000 acres) under vine, followed by Merlot at 266,000ha (657,000 acres). Both grapes, famously, got their start in this relatively small region in southwest France.

The name Bordeaux blend itself is unnecessary – Cabernet Sauvignon has been present in Australia, California, South Africa, Argentina and elsewhere since the late 18th and early 19th century, becoming part of the global viticultural landscape not many decades after it had first established itself in Bordeaux as a natural cross between Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Franc. But it was Prohibition in the USA, in particular, that caused it to then be seen as an 'import' in the mid-20th century.

Of course, if current climate trends continue, it may well be that the Bordeaux blend – which, for so long, has been a shortcut to respectability for emerging regions and a pathway to price rises for new bottlings – becomes a historical anomaly. But for now, the combination of these varieties continues to reign supreme, with many of the greatest wine estates in the world bottling their own versions; Tuscany and Napa are perhaps the two regions that can most legitimately lay claim to standing on the same fine wine pedestal with the style.

I don't claim to be definitive in this listing, since it makes some glaring omissions at the very top end – from Masseto and Sassicaia, to Opus One, Harlan, Abreu and Colgin. Instead, the selection highlights some of the more intriguing current-release Bordeaux blends that showcase the ability of this combination to create long-lasting wines with regional characteristics.

There are many ways to distinguish Bordeaux blends in different locations. I often find levels of Cabernet Sauvignon far higher in these blends than you would ever find in Bordeaux itself, most typically because the grape is able to ripen far more regularly when planted away from the Atlantic seaboard. This means you can find a purity of expression, almost distilled cassis purée, in Australia or Argentina far more typically than in St-Julien or Margaux – and more supple, inviting tannins than from a cool vintage in the Médoc. This is often also why you typically find less of a role for Merlot in the New World, where the Cabernet gets ripe enough that it doesn't need its fruit-filled corrective.

There are a few wines here that are truly linked to Bordeaux – Don Melchor winemaker Enrique Tirado takes samples from Chile to the Médoc for blending with consultant Eric Boissenot. Others work with Bordeaux consultants such as Stéphane Derenoncourt and Michel Rolland, while most simply take the varieties and imprint them with their own character, reinventing their voice and trying to prove that, ultimately, the Bordeaux blend should be seen as democratic, not autocratic.



96

Wynn's Coonawarra Estate, John Riddoch Cabernet Sauvignon, Coonawarra, Australia 2019

Drink 2025–42

Deep plum in colour. Exotic fennel and turmeric spicing, tons of cassis and black cherry; cocoa, eucalyptus, graphite and crushed rock. This is classic John Riddoch, with its powerful but understated tannic frame, building through the palate with a slate edge that slows things down, and an undertow of savoury signature Cabernet Sauvignon character. Balanced and fresh, it feels almost cool climate in its precision. 31% new oak (French oak barrels and hogsheads). 13.5%

£74.50 (in bond) Justerini & Brooks

93

Oldenburg Vineyards, Rondekop Rhodium, Stellenbosch, South Africa 2020

Drink 2023–36

Cabernet Franc-dominant in its aromatics and taste profile, this has arrow-straight direction, and bright and vibrant blue- and red-fruit character, with silky tannins. The oak is present but not overpowering, and it would suit being served slightly cool to bring out the freshness. Think ripe Loire rather than Bordeaux in terms of its character. Another impressive wine from Nic van Aarde, from vines located on the iconic Rondekop hill. 46% new oak. 13.5%

£35 (2018) Wine&Something

94

Inglenook, Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley, California 2019

Drink 2024–36

The depth and power of this wine is striking from the first moment – and even now after two years in bottle, it feels fresh out of the gate, barely revving up its engines. Black cherry, fennel, slate, tobacco, cigar box; give it a few more years in bottle to fully smooth out, then enjoy this luscious example of Napa Cab. Inglenook is owned by Francis Ford Coppola, with Philippe Bascaules director of winemaking. 43% new oak. 14.5%

£61 (in bond) Cru

100

Catena Zapata, Adrianna Vineyard, Mundus Bacillus Terrae Vino de Parcela, Uco Valley, Mendoza, Argentina 2019

Drink 2024–40

This is one of the most exciting of the September releases on Bordeaux’s La Place distribution network and one that captures the progress and interest around terroir in Argentina right now. From a vineyard set at 1,500m elevation, on limestone-dominant soils, it immediately sets itself apart with soaring aromatics that give nuance and depth, plus seductively curling peony and raspberry leaf. Powerful and full of character, with chalky tannins, pulses of electricity, and dried herb and fennel studding to the fresh raspberry and red cherry fruits. So good. 14%

£161 (in bond) Lay & Wheeler

97

Clos Apalta, Apalta Valley, Colchagua, Chile 2019

Drink 2023–36

Sculpted and elegant, with one of the highest proportions of Carmenère to date, this shows star-bright blueberry and cassis fruits, raspberry leaf, white pepper, cocoa bean and lemongrass, and a ton of slate-scrape tannins. This is a brilliant wine from a warm and dry vintage, meaning they needed careful plot selection to achieve this result. 90% new oak, then one year in bottle before release. Seventh-generation Charles de Bournet Marnier Lapostolle heads up Clos Apalta today, with Jacques Begarie as technical director and Michel Rolland consulting. 15%

£92.68 Lay & Wheeler

97

Familia Torres, Mas La Plana, Penedès, Spain 2017

Drink 2024–42

Combines structure and power with a savoury edge that speaks of the finesse and ageability of this iconic wine. In my opinion, it is one of the best examples of European Cabernet outside of Bordeaux – less flashy than many Super-Tuscan versions, for sure, but with a quiet power and utterly delicious eucalyptus, sage, cassis and mint, plus that earthy and smoky red pepper edge that you find in the best Médoc wines. Vines planted by Miguel Torres in the 1970s are now expressing their full complexity. 85% new oak. 14.5%

From £43.16 Hedonism Wines, Wine Direct

96

Joseph Phelps Vineyards, Insignia, Napa Valley, California 2019

Drink 2024–40

The classic Joseph Phelps bottling, released after three years of ageing in barrel and bottle. Espresso, cocoa bean, cassis, earth, crushed rock, leather – this is a wonderful example of what Cabernet Sauvignon can deliver in Napa. The 2019 Insignia is the first vintage to include fruit from the new Phelps vineyard El Venadito, located in the Oak Knoll District, just south of the winery’s Yountville Vineyard. Owned by LVMH by the time of release, this was made under the Phelps family, owners for more than five decades. (Founder Joseph Phelps died in 2015.) 14.5%

£192 (in bond) Grand Vin Wine Merchants

95

Peter Michael, Les Pavots, Knights Valley, Sonoma, California 2019

Drink 2024–38

Here is the welcoming spicy embrace of a Sonoma mountain Cabernet, with its shot of freshly cut herbs, rosemary, dill, cracked black pepper, silky tannins and a good kick of acidity through the final moments. If you are worried about California Cabs being too big or unapproachable, this is a glorious place to get to know their potential. It has the gourmet black chocolate and opulence of California but is loaded up with juicy acidity. 100% new oak; with Luc Morlet as consultant, having previously been the winemaker. 14.7%

£195 (2018) Vineyard Cellars

95

Château Marsyas, Bekaa Valley, Lebanon 2009

Drink 2022–36

Cumin, rosemary and dried herbs, with smoky tomato, charcoal flame-grilled pepper, tapenade and blackberry. Still young, even at 13 years old, so give it time to open and then revel in the distinct, character-driven beauty of this Bekaa Valley wine from the Saadé family’s property at the foot of Mount Barouk. Good freshness on the finish, excellent texture and grip; this needs a lot of airing but rewards patience. 14%

£24.95 (2015) Corney & Barrow

95

Dalla Valle Vineyards, Maya, Napa Valley, California 2019

Drink 2024–40

Silky concentrated fruits, shot through with liquorice, slate, graphite, Chinese spice and savoury tannins. The overall structure is supple but powerful – excellent stuff. Mother-and-daughter team Naoko and Maya Dalla Valle farm biodynamically. 14.8%

£464 (in bond) Farr Vintners

94

Almaviva, Puente Alto, Chile 2020

Drink 2023–35

This is full of complexity and pleasure, with an embrace of blueberry and raspberry fruits. Cardamom and turmeric, with lemongrass and sliced dill, giving sculpted, lifted acidities that have been maintained through the heat of 2020, a vintage marking 25 years of this property. An impressive wine with a floral edge. 75% new oak. 15%

£120 (in bond) Berry Bros & Rudd

94

Beaulieu Vineyard, BV, Georges de Latour Private Reserve, Napa Valley, California 2019

Drink 2024–38

This is an important wine in the history of Napa, seen as the region’s first cult Cabernet and longtime home of winemaker André Tchelistcheff. Today it’s owned by Treasury Wine Estates, under winemaker Trevor Durling. A balanced and generous vintage, with more volume than over the past few years. Spiced herbs, tobacco, cinnamon, crushed cloves and blackberry fruits – archetypal Napa Cab. 14.5%

£115 (in bond) Ditton Wine & Spirits

95

Daou Family Estates, Soul of a Lion, Paso Robles, California 2019

Drink 2024–40

Inky depths to the damson colour; immediately sets the pace with fresh mint and cassis aromatics and nuanced rosemary, sage, cocoa beans, grilled cedar and crushed rock. This is a rock-star Cabernet that will impress anyone but doesn’t knock you out, even with the high alcohols. Plush, smooth, well integrated and broad-shouldered. I keep waiting for it to overpower, but it takes the foot off the pedal at just the right moment. Easy to love. 100% new oak. 15%

£168 (2018) Harrods; £137 (2018, in bond) Honest Grapes

94

Don Melchor, Puente Alto, Chile 2020

Drink 2024–36

Deep plum colour. Raspberry and damson fruits on the attack, given width and depth through the mid-palate by creamy liquorice and cocoa bean. Cedar and vanilla-smoked oak. This is packed with plump fruit, confident and full of character, but it needs to soften further, with a few more years in bottle. Enrique Tirado is synonymous with this Chilean powerhouse, having been its winemaker for more than 20 years and now its CEO. This is a true Bordeaux blend, since each year Tirado takes the fledgling wine samples to Lamarque, a small town in the Médoc where consultant Eric Boissenot has his laboratory, and together they work on the final blend. As of the 2019 vintage, it has been made separately from the rest of the Concha y Toro range in its own winery. 14.5%

£120 Harrods; £81 (in bond) Cru Wine

93

Susana Balbo, Brioso Single Vineyard Agrelo, Luján de Cuyo, Mendoza, Argentina 2020

Drink 2024–40

Spice and smoke are high on the agenda here. Plenty of impact; a trace of heat, but it is well balanced by charcoal, grilled red peppers, mandarin peel, liquorice and turmeric. Historically significant also, since Susana Balbo was the first female winemaker in Argentina after graduating from Don Bosco University in Mendoza in 1981. 14.5%

£37.80 Hedonism Wines

93

Santa Rita Casa Real, Reserva Especial Cabernet Sauvignon, Alto Maipo, Chile 2019

Drink 2025–38

Joyful Chilean Cabernet Sauvignon from the Alto Jahuel area of the Maipo Valley, this is loaded with sweet black cherry and damson fruits, a thick coating of chocolate and smoked espresso beans – generous and easy to recommend. A trace of heat on the finish, but there is so much going on here that you barely notice. It delivers impressive, well-balanced pleasure, with a well-judged flick of bitter marzipan on the finish. Great stuff from winemaker Sebastián Labbé. 14.5%

£60 (in bond) VinQuinn

94

Bonterra Vineyards, The McNab, Mendocino County, California 2019

Drink 2023–38

I love the smoky red pepper, chestnut and tar barbecue feel of this, with juicy plump raspberry, fig, red cherry and kirsch fruit, all given focus and lift by winemaker Rich Parducci via bitter fennel through the close of play. It's just a shame about the heavy bottle, especially for a biodynamic wine. 15%

£34.85 Vinvm

94

Viñedos Familia Chadwick, Viñedo Chadwick, Puente Alto, Maipo Valley, Chile 2020

Drink 2025–38

The focus of this iconic 15ha estate is firmly on dark fruits and powerful Cabernet Sauvignon character, with its muscular tannic structure and intense red and black fruits wrapped up in bitter chocolate. With slow-build spices, this shows a different side of Chile, and the heat of the vintage comes through not in flavour – the fruit is fresh and supple – but in power and supercharged concentration. I'm always a big fan of this wine, and winemaker Francisco Baettig has done an excellent job of harnessing the potential of the site and its 30-year-old vines. Harvest began on 12 March and was finished by the beginning of April, keeping it relatively low in alcohol, with the winemaking focused on lower temperatures to moderate the natural power and tannic architecture of the vintage. Clear ageing potential. 75% new oak. 13%

£231.67 (in bond) Burnett & Herbert

94

Oldenburg Vineyards, Cabernet Franc, Stellenbosch, South Africa 2019

Drink 2022–32

From a vineyard set at 410m above sea level – one of the highest spots in Stellenbosch – this is packed with blueberry, raspberry, slate, tomato leaf and sage. Stony, focused, crunchy and cheerful, it has energy and juice, and it bangs through the palate. One to gulp. A brilliant-value wine that is easy to drink but full of character and charm. Great stuff from winemaker Nic van Aarde, making use of a newly opened winery for this vintage. 14%

£27 (2018) Wine&Something

94

Viñedos Familia Chadwick, Seña, Aconcagua Valley, Chile 2020

Drink 2025–42

Balanced, intense raspberry, bilberry, balsamic, dill, tar, grilled cedar and sandalwood. Welcoming and confident, with classic Seña swagger; the balance and savoury spice notes arrive if you allow it to sit in the glass. This was a hot and dry vintage, with very little rain over the winter before the season began, and the main challenge throughout the season was water availability. They picked one week earlier than in 2019, and upped the Malbec in the blend to keep

freshness and acidity, and to help with the aromatics. The result is more powerful and opulent than recent vintages, with an emphasis on cocoa bean and then dark mint chocolate on the finish. This is a wine of layers, the tannins a little firm compared to the past two years of the wine, and it could do with a little more air through the mid-palate. But it absolutely delivers on the house style – not easy to maintain in such dry vintages. Biodynamic farming. 13.5%

£105.70 Petersham Cellar

93

Aristea, Cabernet Sauvignon, Stellenbosch, South Africa 2015

Drink 2022–36

Brilliantly balanced, this is truly savoury Cabernet Sauvignon, creamy through the mid-palate but restrained and focused on dried herbs and spices, with sage, eucalyptus and mint alongside the black fruits. The oak is present but well hidden. There's a lot of complexity here, but delivered with a light touch. 2015 was the first vintage of this wine (they are just about to release the 2020), and it has only got better in the years since, but this shows, at seven years old, that it was an exceptional estate from the start. Winemaker Matthew Krone uses 33% new oak and fruit across Stellenbosch, Elgin and Hemel-en-Aarde. 14%

£29.95 Private Cellar

93

Orma, Toscana IGT, Italy 2020

Drink 2024–38

Showcasing the firm, savoury tannins and dried Italian herbs that even Bordeaux blends can deliver from the heart of Bolgheri, this is packed with blackberry, liquorice, sage, fennel and smoked earth. Generous and moreish. Made by the Moretti Cuseri family from 7.5ha of vines located in the same corner of Tuscany as Sassicaia and Ornellaia, with considerably less clay in its soils than other coastal areas of Tuscany, dominated instead by sand and gravel. 15%

£71.67 Millesima

90

Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, Hands of Time, Napa Valley, California 2018

Drink 2023–36

Creamy espresso, black chocolate, cigar box, cocoa bean, plump damson and black cherry fruit – this is classic Napa, where full fruit ripeness gives supple tannins and drops of silk. It threatens overoaking but just pulls it back. Really needs time in a carafe right now, but once open it has an unfussy charm and provides a window into Stag's Leap. 14.5%

£24.76 Wine Direct