

Wine Spectator

Tasting Report

Too Hot to Handle

Even Napa's top producers struggled in the scorching 2022 vintage for Cabernet

By James Molesworth

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"It was brutal." "It was certainly traumatic." "The most painful experience of my professional life." This is how some California winemakers responded on being asked to describe the 2022 vintage for Cabernet Sauvignon, a category dominated by Napa Valley producers. As these quotes attest, the vintage was difficult, marked by a singular weather event that was extreme in its own right, while also coming at the worst possible time.

Since my previous report on California Cabernet (Nov. 15, 2024), I have reviewed more than 500 Cabernet Sauvignon-based wines in blind tastings at our Napa office, more than 350 of them from the 2022 vintage that now dominates the marketplace. The results show it was a very challenging year to make great wine.

The singular event that altered the vintage was a heat wave—but not just any heat wave. It was a heat dome, extreme for its high temperatures as well as its duration, and it arrived during Labor Day weekend, just when Napa's Cabernet grapes were nearly ready to be picked.

These conditions have had a severe impact on the quality of the vintage, with no classic-rated 2022s emerging from my tastings so far. Of the more than 325 '22 Cabernets in this report, only 30 percent earn outstanding ratings of 90 points or higher on Wine Spectator's 100-point scale, a far cry from the previous vintage in which nearly 80 percent of the more than 750 Cabernets rated 90-plus. (There's a chance the numbers for 2022 could change, since I'll continue to taste the vintage as late releases become available for review.)

For now, the highest-rated wines from the 2022 vintage check in at 94 points. Leading the way are a pair of bottlings from Lokoya, the Cabernet Sauvignon Howell Mountain 2022 (\$600) and Cabernet Sauvignon Mount Veeder 2022 (\$600), along with the VHR Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville 2022 (94, \$300). The success of these wines represents the herculean efforts of Lokoya winemaker Chris Carpenter and VHR winemakers Françoise Peschon and Isabelle Straka, as well as the hard work of their teams, who were able to get quality fruit into the winery before things fell apart—and things really did fall apart. After the heat dome receded, leaves crinkled and turned brown and the vines that had shut down during the worst of the heat never fully recovered. The vintage was essentially done at that point.

A closer look at this trio of top-scorers reveals clues on how to find the best Cabernets in 2022. In the case of Lokoya, one key factor is the location of its vineyard sources in Napa's mountain AVAs, which have typically cooler climates than their counterparts in the valley. (The bulk of vineyards in the valley, particularly those on the valley floor and up valley, were the most compromised.) With the VHR bottling, sourced from a small portion of the vintners' own Vine Hill Ranch, the difference comes from the vineyard's tendency to ripen earlier.

Overall, the style of the 2022 vintage is very easy to describe: forward. Because of the year's extreme heat event, you might have expected jammy fruit and/or harsh tannins. But in a reprieve for the vintage, the fruit quality is fresh enough, though there are some wines that tilt to the jammy side. There are no harsh or underripe tannins either; instead, there are basically no tannins at all.

The end result is a fruit profile that arrives in an up-front gush, with little to no spine to help extend the finish, where the fruit tends to fade out quickly. The energy of the wines leans toward sedate, without the juicy vibrancy of top years. The 2022 vintage isn't flawed—a surprise, since volatile acidity or brettanomyces could have wreaked havoc with high pH and structure-deficient musts—but it is severely compromised, offering immediate appeal at best. Based on my tastings, 2022 earns an overall rating of 84 points, the lowest for a vintage of California Cabernet since 1998.

This report includes an additional 150 late-release bottlings from 2021, a vintage that offers compelling quality in the form of sleek, vivid reds that drip with fruit while maintaining freshness and drive. Earning 97 points overall, the 2021 vintage matches some of the best years for Cabernet over the past two decades, just slightly behind the current benchmark, 2018, at 99 points.

Among the top late-release '21s in this report are the Dunn Cabernet Sauvignon Howell Mountain 2021 (97 points, \$220) and Mayacamas Cabernet Sauvignon Mount Veeder 2021 (97, \$185). Corison, David Arthur, Revana, Eisele Vineyard, Opus One and newcomer Bergman also field notable late releases. The Etude Cabernet Sauvignon Rutherford 2021 (95, \$155), which draws on fruit from the Morisoli vineyard, is a relative value in a category where \$200 has become the entry point.

Since the run of drought vintages that started in 2012, Mother Nature had been sending signals that at some point there'd be a knockout blow not from wildfires or rain, but from heat. Heat spells, particularly over Labor Day, have become a normal occurrence in Napa. Leading vintners have responded with viticultural changes designed to gear their vineyards for ripening that occurs earlier on the calendar. The heat has also helped drive a shift in style over the past 15 years, away from the late-harvested, highly extracted, heavily oaked profile that dominated from the mid-1990s through the early 2000s.

The warnings were borne out when the 2022 growing season obliterated any chance of producing quality, age-worthy wines. The Labor Day heatwave not only topped out at 118° F in up-valley spots such as St. Helena, but also lasted for nearly a week. The vast majority of high-end Cabernet Sauvignon bottlings bore the brunt.

"We were fermenting dead grapes," explains Tod Mostero, winemaker at Dominus Estate in Yountville. "The heat began on Sept. 6, and the forecasts didn't predict what wound up happening because they're based on history, and what came to pass had never happened before. It was especially painful to witness, because the potential up until that point was among our best vintages."

The conditions presented a very difficult choice for winemakers: to make wines that would not achieve their typical quality level or to skip the vintage altogether. Mostero, along with owner Christian Moueix, chose the latter. That's why no wine at all was produced by Dominus in 2022. It's a decision that speaks volumes about their commitment to quality. Producers who did bottle wine in 2022 often looked back to 2020, when many of them chose not to bottle because of the harvesttime wildfires that year. Their calculation was that skipping two out of three vintages is an entirely different economic proposition than skipping one.

"It would have been a much harsher selection in 2022 without 2020 having happened," says Thomas Rivers Brown, owner and winemaker at Rivers-Marie in Calistoga. "As it was, we left stuff out. Both Panek, our best vineyard, and Vidovich Lane, which is right next to Dr. Crane Vineyard, went into our Napa bottling of Cab. But without a 2020 crop, we couldn't afford to be as severe as we would've liked. The reality is, if everyone who skipped 2020 also skipped 2022, half the valley would've been out of business."

The Rivers-Marie Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville M-Bar Ranch 2022 (92, \$165) offers a core of warmed cassis, singed vanilla and dried violet flavors that move slowly. The fruit is steady through the finish, and while the wine shows the heat of the vintage, it doesn't reach beyond its grasp, tasting like a solid Oakville Cabernet. For 2022, that counts as a success.

There were other ways to avoid dealing with the worst of 2022, namely trimming production levels. Brown also oversees the winemaking at Schrader Cellars, one of Napa Valley's flagship brands. He reduced the lineup of wines significantly, down from Schrader's typical dozen bottlings to just four. Even these wines—To Kalon, Monastery Block, Heritage Clone and Wappo Hill—were down 35 percent compared with their typical volume. Both the Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville Heritage Clone To Kalon Vineyard 2022 (93, \$525) and Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville To Kalon Vineyard 2022 (93, \$525) earn kudos for the effort.

Many Napa winemakers note that their yields were down 25 percent to 50 percent, due to both dehydration and sorting. "For us the heat wave resulted in a 50 percent loss of crop," Carpenter says. "The good news is what we lost was easy to separate. Clusters that collapsed were left in the vineyard, and then a little bit more sorting at the winery."

Other producers also forged ahead, battling through the heat dome to try to get something into bottle. It wasn't easy. "At 96° F, a vine shuts down and goes into survival mode—and it was 103° F in the vineyard on Labor Day," says Lindsey Wallingford, winemaker at Saint Helena Winery. "It takes a week for a vine to wake back up after a day like that, and the heat went on for a week. 2022 was a really tough one. If you managed to make a good wine in that vintage, pat yourself on the back."

Wallingford is among those who can. Her Saint Helena Winery Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2022 (88, \$115) delivers the typical 2022 profile, with friendly up-front plum and blackberry compote flavors coated with a warm cocoa note that holds sway through the finish. It should drink well now and over the next few years. For the most part, the bulk of the '22s should be consumed before 2030.

Following the lead of Lokoya, other successful wines from mountain AVAs include the Brandlin Cabernet Sauvignon Mount Veeder 2022 (93, \$110), Continuum Sage Mountain Vineyard Napa Valley 2022 (93, \$340), Mount Veeder Winery Cabernet Sauvignon Mount Veeder Reserve 2022 (93, \$125) and Philip Togni Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2022 (93, \$195), which comes from the Togni family's vineyard atop Spring Mountain.

“Having just slightly lower temps at higher elevations made all the difference in the world from our perspective,” says Lisa Togni. “It was still incredibly hot for us. It happened right during picking—and I’ve never had to worry about human safety in that regard. There was a lot of tough decision-making. There were no great choices, just maybe good ones. We’d begun picking well before the heat, our earliest date ever of Aug. 22. We’d never picked Cab in August before. I’m glad we did start early as we got about 40 percent in, and then we resumed on Sept. 8, which was the second day of heat, and brought it all in over the next three days. We got lucky that way. Is it our greatest wine ever? No. But one of the jobs of a wine is to show what the vintage was.”

Peschon and Straka’s efforts at Vine Hill Ranch are another leading indicator from the vintage, a sign of the dividends producers are seeing from shifting their farming practices since the drought run that began in 2012. “Vine Hill Ranch is an early site, and after 2020 it’s been farmed to encourage early harvests,” Peschon says. “We began harvesting on Aug. 30 and finished on Sept. 2 with the blocks that made it into the wine. We held out on one block until Sept. 15, hoping it would recover, but the post-heat fermentation lots had high VA levels, bleached color and not a lot of character.”

Among the key farming shifts for California vintners have been the use of trellising to carry more canopy, which provides greater shade to the fruit, and the planting of cover crop, which helps to moderate soil temperatures. “The better parcels with increased canopy that could hold on were in better balance,” notes John Olney, winemaker for Ridge Vineyards in the Santa Cruz Mountains, whose spirited Ridge Monte Bello Santa Cruz Mountains 2022 (93, \$325) merits a shout-out.

“The only reason we survived is because of all the hanging canopy we carry,” says winemaker Graeme MacDonald. “That dappled sunlight is the only thing that keeps the fruit from getting fried.” MacDonald’s Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville 2022 (93, \$225) is sourced from his family parcel in Oakville’s To Kalon vineyard.

“From the heat event, I saw it crisp the leaves, which I hadn’t seen before,” MacDonald adds. “It made me decide that there wasn’t going to be any further development after the heat wave ended. The vines had basically given up. At least in our vineyard there wasn’t the photosynthetic area to sustain the vines’ productivity. The vines sacrificed themselves to give what fruit they could.”

That sacrifice came in the form of dropping tannins from the finished wines, since phenolic degradation is believed to begin when temperatures hit 105° F. “In the end, it was the first year ever that I thought we needed more tannin, which is not what we ever need at Seavey,” says winemaker Jim Duane, who also practices carrying more canopy. “The only thing I can think of is that the tannins were the sacrificial lamb. The heat blew those out while the vine preserved itself.”

“Absolutely vines do that—tannins degrade in the heat,” says Kristy Melton, winemaker at Freemark Abbey. “We tilted our base Napa bottling to a little more mountain fruit because of that. I also skipped the second racking of the Cabs to avoid ‘smushing’ the fruit, because the wines don’t have their typical spine.” Melton’s Freemark Abbey Cabernet Sauvignon Rutherford Sycamore Vineyard 2022 (92, \$225) and Duane’s Seavey Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2022 (91, \$225) are admirable efforts for the vintage.

The potential for technical flaws to appear after fermenting such compromised fruit ran high in 2022. That volatile acidity or brett weren’t widespread in the wines under review is a testament to the skill of Napa winemakers. Quality producers prefer not to manipulate their wines, but when the choice is between making something good versus something not drinkable, adjustments have to be made.

“I came over from Burgundy as soon as I saw the heat wave forecasted and everything was almost ready,” says Diana Snowden Seysses of Snowden Vineyards, who also makes the wines at Burgundy’s Domaine Dujac. “We brought it all in as fast as we could. We were around 21 Brix right before, and then every day it would jump 3 degrees of Brix per day, so it was at 27 when we were bringing it in. With heat late in ripening, the seed tannin ripening accelerates, and so things get out of whack. You wind up with alcohols that normally you’d get in October, with flavors that are on the early ripening spectrum. Since the Brix levels were jumping, I did have to add water and tartaric acid. I was afraid it was going to be a mix of underripe tannins and cooked fruit. I try to let Mother Nature do what it will, but it’s important to also make something delicious.”



While Cabernet is grown throughout California, regions known for their particularly high quality include Napa, Sonoma and mountain AVAs such as Santa Cruz. (Lisa Aurigemma)

The Snowden Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Brothers Vineyard 2022 (92, \$110) shows the sedate energy of the vintage, but still manages to feature enticing loganberry and mulberry fruit, along with stylish rooibos tea, mulled anise and iris details. A succulent edge emerges through the finish, which helps sets the wine apart in this vintage. Another spot in Napa that stood out from the pack was Coombsville.

Located in the southeastern corner of the valley, the appellation is heavily influenced by the breeze and fog from San Pablo Bay, making the area similar for Cabernet to what Carneros is for Pinot Noir, with its cooler aspect providing an advantage in 2022.

“Coombsville mitigated that heat quite a bit,” says Alison Rodriguez, winemaker for Silverado Vineyards. “We did get 100 degrees in our Coombsville vineyard, but the duration of that heat during the day wasn’t as long as it was in other parts of the valley, especially up valley. It’s also the first place in the valley to get a cooling breeze at night. The vineyard was resilient, and I think it came through relatively well.”

The Silverado Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon Coombsville GEO 2022 (92, \$125) is another notable effort, while the winery’s Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2022 (89, \$75) delivers an ample 25,000-case production.

Heat will no doubt play a role in more vintages to come, but Napa producers are getting ahead of the curve as they shift their farming practices and learn from their experience. As long as another heat dome doesn’t occur right at harvesttime, there’s no doubt that winemakers will continue to produce far more compelling vintages than not.

In the meantime, though, prices for the 2022s are distressingly high for the quality of the vintage. Producers missed a golden opportunity to reset the market. That may exacerbate the slow movement of inventory while not winning them any new customers for now. (For more on the question of pricing, see “The Biggest Mistake With 2022 Cabernet”) With 2021 and 2023 as bookends, the category remains intact despite the damage caused by 2022. Its crown may have been dented, but Cabernet is still the king of wines.

Senior editor James Molesworth is Wine Spectator’s lead taster on California Cabernet Sauvignon.

James Molesworth's Recommended California Cabernet Sauvignons

More than 500 wines were tasted for this report. A free alphabetical list is available. WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted over the past year—including all 2022 Cabernets from California—using the online Wine Ratings search.



Merryvale

Profile Napa Valley 2021 | \$235

Offers the vivid and alluring fruit of the vintage, showing lovely notes of mulberry, blackberry and cassis that are rich and stylish as they glide along, with hints of warmed anise, apple wood and violet. A cocoa accent adds a toasty edge to the finish, along with a late tug of warm earth, but the fruit wins out easily. Impressive. Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc. Best from 2026 through 2038. 625 cases made.

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Wine Type and Color
Red Still



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