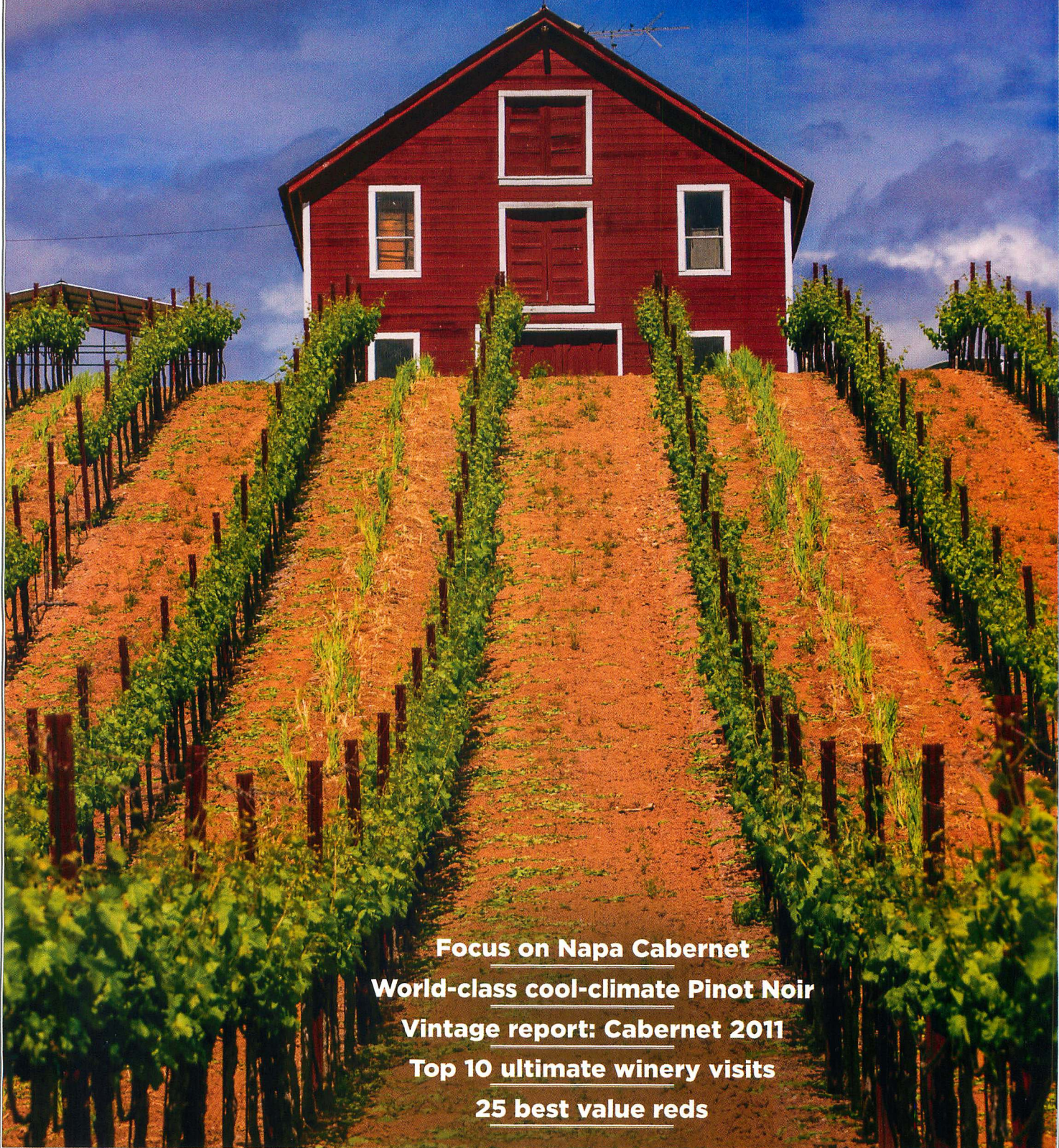


The world's best wine magazine

Decanter

California 2014



Focus on Napa Cabernet
World-class cool-climate Pinot Noir
Vintage report: Cabernet 2011
Top 10 ultimate winery visits
25 best value reds

Next stop, Lodi

Once seen purely as a backwater for good value wines, Lodi's treasure trove of old vines coupled with adventurous winemakers is throwing up some exciting and complex bottlings. Matt Stamp MS reckons it's time to take Lodi seriously

Lodi at a glance

Total area 202,340ha
Under vine 44,440ha
Sub-AVAs, from north to south Sloughhouse, Cosumnes River, Alta Mesa, Borden Ranch, Jahant, Mokelumne River, Clements Hills
www.lodiwine.com

WITH MOUNT DIABLO looming behind us and California's Highway 12 unfolding before us, I headed east with Turley winemaker Tegan Passalacqua, traversing the flat, nearly sea-level San Joaquin Valley, a bread basket between the low coastal mountains and majestic Sierras. Highway 12 is a conduit for northern California's wine regions: the road begins in the west, in the heart of Russian River Valley, crosses Carneros and the southern Napa Valley, skirts the Sacramento River Delta system as it leads due east, and finds its terminus in the old gold country of the Sierra Foothills. On its way, it passes directly through the small, agrarian city of Lodi, our destination.

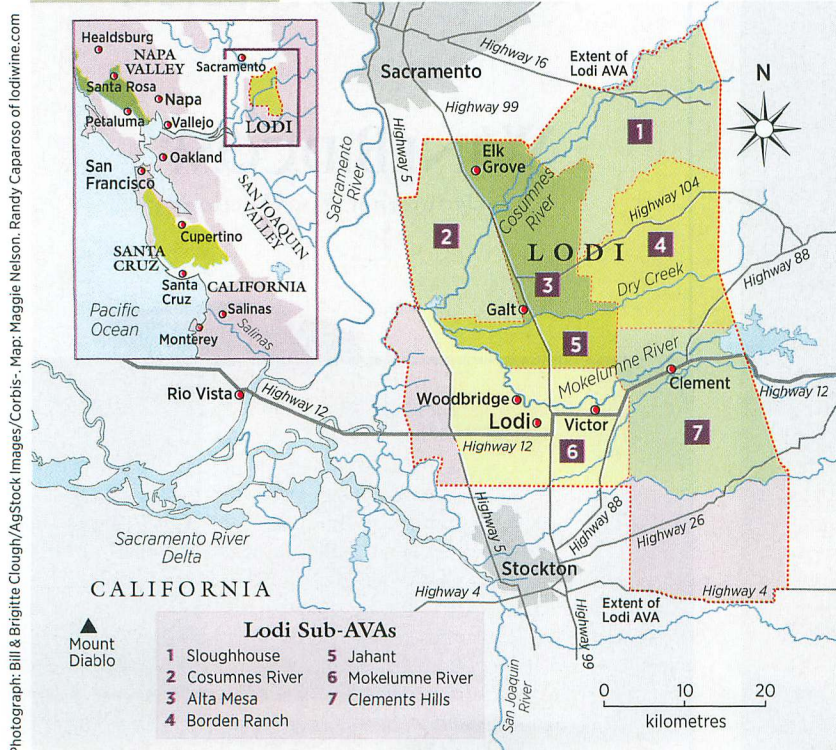
In 1979, something drew Robert Mondavi back to

here, his childhood home, to create the value brand Woodbridge. Passalacqua and other prominent Californian winemakers follow in his footsteps today, drawn to the dirt, vines and potential of Lodi. Yes, this is the home of Woodbridge, Delicato and 7 Deadly Zins, but that's no longer the whole story.

'Lodi's grape-growers may be the best in California,' Passalacqua admits, 'but they aren't the best wine-growers.' Yet they are improving rapidly, and in the region's sandy loam soils there are hidden caches of old, own-rooted vines thriving in the absence of phylloxera. Zinfandel, Lodi's most important quality grape, is especially suited for a ripe old age as it is naturally resistant to eutypa, the 'dead arm' disease that wreaks havoc on many vine varieties in their early adulthood.

Passalacqua himself recently purchased the Kirschenmann Vineyard, with 6ha (hectares) of Zinfandel vines planted in 1915, and makes a vineyard-designate with his fruit for Turley (see wine recommendations box). Other old-vine Zinfandel vineyards are the focus of a new local project, Lodi Native, a six-wine set of single-vineyard, natural-ferment wines produced by six Lodi wineries. One participant, Fields Family's Ryan Sherman, makes a lighter, brighter style of Zinfandel from 1905 vines; another, M2 Cellars, puts forth a much riper, richer style from a site planted in 1916.

The oldest vineyards are rarely wholly planted to Zinfandel; instead, they are mixed black-grape vineyards, comprising Zinfandel and a smattering of other varieties, from Carignan and Petite Sirah to *teinturiers* (red-fleshed as well as red-skinned grapes) and the occasional white grape. There are also a few remaining stands of Flame Tokay, a disappearing variety of Algerian origin entwined with Lodi's heritage. These old, embattled vineyards are drawing attention towards Lodi, and the region is richly endowed: no complete register of such vineyards exists, but Stuart Spencer, winemaker at St Amant, estimates that between 1,200ha and 2,000ha of vines were planted in the Lodi AVA before the 1960s.



Photograph: Bill & Brigitte Clough/AgStock Images/Corbis. Map: Maggie Nelson. Randy Caparoso of lodiwine.com



'The oldest sites are rarely wholly planted to Zinfandel; instead, they are mixed black-grape vineyards, comprising Zinfandel and a small smattering of other varieties and the occasional white grape'

Of course, much ado about old vines is anecdotal, yet older vineyards tend to ripen more slowly and retain more acidity than younger vines. Lower pH and higher acidity at harvest, especially tartaric acidity, can be an asset for Zinfandel, which can easily reach alcohol levels of 15% and above. Determining the age of an old vineyard is not an exact science, however; records are often scarce, and farmers' memories can supplant documentation. The term 'old vines' can mean different things to different people in the absence of regulations controlling its use. Carlisle Winery's Mike Officer likes to repurpose the US Supreme Court phrase used to describe its threshold test for obscurity: 'Old vines are like obscurity. I know them when I see them.'

In demand

And so outsiders begin to pour in along Highway 12. Sonoma County-based Zinfandel masters Carlisle and Bedrock source fruit from Passalacqua's Kirschenmann Vineyard. Randall Gram has been sniffing around too. It's not just to explore the county's geriatric wards: Neyers in Napa Valley is making young-vine Zinfandel from grower Markus Bokisch's Vista Luna Vineyard, while 'new' producers



Top: Lodi encompasses dozens of boutique wineries as well as major brands like Woodbridge Below: with vines dating back to the late 19th century, Bechtold Vineyard is home to the world's oldest plot of Cinsault

Forlorn Hope, Ferdinand and Scholium Project are making marvellously weird whites from the same site with grapes like Albariño and Verdelho. In addition to several Turley old-vine Lodi wines, Passalacqua will begin making Lodi single-vineyard wines in 2014 for his own label, Sandlands.

The outsiders have arrived, and recognition has followed; however, local winemakers – who have enjoyed great successes with mass brands – are still finding their voice with premium wines. Even top examples of Zinfandel from Lodi winemakers >

'The outsiders have arrived, and recognition has followed; however, local winemakers are still finding their voice with premium wines'

Stamps' pick of the new Lodi

Forlorn Hope, Kirschenmann Pinot Gris, Mokelumne River 2012

16.5/20 (88/100)

N/A UK www.forlornhopewines.com

Yes, it's orange. Ten-day skin maceration and semi-carbonic fermentation yields a funky, grippy, round, waxy Pinot Gris. No oak, partial malolactic fermentation and a slight acetate note. For the adventurous, it needs time in the glass. 47 cases made. **Drink** 2014-2016 **Alcohol** 12%



Turley, Dogtown Vineyard Zinfandel, Clements Hills 2005

17.75 (92)

N/A UK* www.turleywinecellars.com

www.turleywinecellars.com

Who says Zin can't age? Dogtown drinks like a New World southern Rhône rendition, and the fruit's richness here keeps the alcohol in check. Liquorice, prune, white pepper and herbal flavours. Sweet tannins and a bounce from acid on the finish. **Drink** 2014-2018 **Alc** 15.3%

Turley, Kirschenmann Vineyard Zinfandel, Mokelumne River 2012

17.75 (92)

N/A UK* www.turleywinecellars.com

Bright, perfumed Zin fruit: raspberry, blueberry, cranberry jam. Rosemary and juniper aromas plus a floral lift give the wine dimension on the nose. With 20% new oak, surprising acidity, and moderate tannins, it's elegant despite its size. **Drink** 2014-2024 **Alc** 15.3%



Birichino, Bechthold Cinsault Old Vines, Mokelumne River 2012

16.75 (89)

£22 **Fields Morris & Verdin, Swig**

Fruity, juicy, delicious and drinkable. Great acidity, with a focus on enjoyment rather than dissection. Another great entry from

Bechthold's wizened vines. Enjoy during summertime. **Drink** 2014-2015 **Alc** 12%

Turley, Bechthold Vineyard Cinsault, Mokelumne River 2013

16.75 (89)

N/A UK* www.turleywinecellars.com

An unexpected entry from the Zinfandel house, this is a moderate-weight, pretty, tart, floral wine, with spicy, green undertones. Neutral oak. Planted in 1886, this is likely to be the world's oldest Cinsault plot.

Drink 2014-2015 **Alc** 13.5%

Fields Family, Lodi Native, The Century Block Zinfandel, Mokelumne River 2012

16.5 (88)

N/A UK www.fieldsfamilywines.com

A different take on Zin: lighter in style and highly aromatic. Nectarine, florals, pepper and tart red fruits. Medium-bodied and lively on the palate, but too lightweight for fans of the super-charged styles. The fruit comes from 1905 vines. **Drink** 2014-2018 **Alc** 14%

St Amant, Lodi Native, Marian's Vineyard Zinfandel, Mokelumne River 2012

16.25 (87)

N/A UK www.stamantwine.com

Still considered 'restrained' for Lodi Zin, this nonetheless shows more power and suggests sweetness with flavours of jam and roasted fig. Rounded tannins and fuller in style, from a 1901 parcel in Mohr-Fry Ranch.

Drink 2014-2018 **Alc** 14.5%



Michael David Winery, 7 Deadly Zins, Lodi 2011

15 (83)

£16.99 **Zinstream Wine**

Lodi's most popular Zinfandel bottling, this wine set the recipe in the region: slightly sweet, super-ripe, soft and crowd-pleasing.

Drink 2014-2015 **Alc** 15%

*Other wines from the producer are in the UK For UK stockists turn to p88 of main issue



often follow a tried-and-tested recipe: high alcohol, overt oak, and noticeable residual sugar. But the potential is there, and outside attention is leading to increasingly sophisticated winemaking among locals like McCay Cellars, St Amant and Fields Family.

There is much to explore: only 20% of the Lodi AVA (202,340ha) is under vine. The Mokelumne River AVA, surrounding the Lodi itself, is its most historic zone, home to the greatest focus of old vines.

Down to the river

Swept by the nearby Delta's breezes, Mokelumne River is a cooler sub-zone within a very warm region, and its deep sandy soils are a perfect habitat for ungrafted Zinfandel. Kirschenmann, Mohr-Fry Ranch, Noma Ranch... most of the region's premier vineyards are in this region, and producers are starting to distinguish between an 'East Side' and 'West Side' style of Zinfandel. In the east, the water table is lower and the sands are deeper and drier, yielding more structured and higher-toned, floral Zinfandels. In the west the wines are darker and rounder, with earthy, loamy notes. Spencer finds a 'herbal, almost tea-leaf character' on the western side. Vintage plays a role, too: 2010 and 2011 were extremely cool compared to 2012 and 2013. However, according to Spencer, old-vine Zinfandel wines in the latter two years have, despite the heat, 'lower alcohols and tend to be more refreshing'.

In 1977, the *Lodi News-Sentinel* pronounced, 'No other words in the language of agriculture are more associated with Lodi than "Flame Tokay".' Those days are gone. Most Flame Tokay, a table grape and base for sweet fortified wines, has been ripped up, and Lodi has begun to redefine itself and its future as a fine-wine growing region in California. The AVA accounts for some 30% of California's annual Zinfandel haul, and growers are increasingly excited about Portuguese, Rhône and Spanish varieties. Albariño, Verdelho, Tempranillo, Grenache, Grenache Blanc, Mourvèdre, Carignan, Cinsault and several Port grapes are all in the ground in



Left: The Lodi Native project produces wines from low-yielding, heritage plots of Zinfandel from historic vineyards like Macchia Vines' Noma Ranch and (below) McCay Cellars' TruLux Vineyard



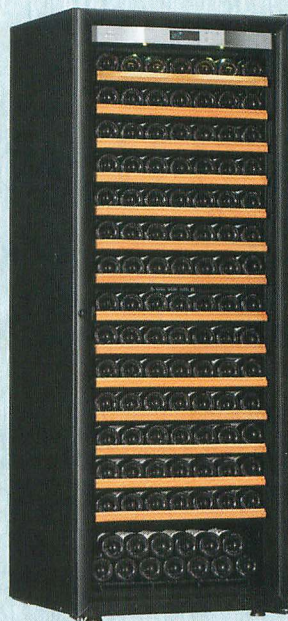
Above: Stuart Spencer is the second generation at St Amant Winery, renowned for its historic Marian's Vineyard, with its 1901 Zin parcel

commercially significant quantities. Land prices remain low enough that growers can afford to experiment with non-traditional grapes, and the high costs of replanting keep old vines in the ground.

Land ownership in Lodi still passes from parent to child – fourth and fifth generations are on the tractor today. And there remain a few things left to discover: Passalacqua and I drove alongside cattle pastures and through one massive, indifferently farmed Cabernet Sauvignon vineyard only to emerge in a scraggly, beautiful, 70-year-old Zinfandel parcel called Dogtown. At dusk, awaiting Lodi's (only) taxi at a nondescript, characterless chain hotel, we stared across the road at an abandoned patch of old vines, awaiting resuscitation. Here and there a row of 10 or 20 Tokays still stands. Take a look: a part of California's viticultural heritage lies hidden here, and the entire state is beginning to pay attention. **D**

Matt Stamp MS is education director of the Guild of Sommeliers in the US

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Best-value reds under £30

Our search for good value Californian reds proved to be more exciting – and less of a challenge – than anticipated. Try and buy, advises Christelle Guibert

IT'S NOT A trade secret: California is not often associated with value. On the contrary, the Golden State has an image that can seem synonymous with the words 'luxury', 'expensive' and 'iconic'. When I was asked to recommend some good value Californian reds for our readers, despite the sympathetic looks from my colleagues, I saw it as a great chance to find out whether California can do value.

After weeks of tasting, I was pleasantly surprised by the overall results. My focus was anything red below £30, and I quickly realised that if you do purely pursue good value and keep a sense of adventure, it's actually quite easy (even for California). Of course, Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Noir reign supreme, but you should also consider lesser-known varieties; Trousseau from California, for example?

Unoaked, or very subtle use of oak is also a key to good value; some of the reds tend to be lighter in body and are best when the fresh and vibrant fruit characters dominate, rather than the toasted characters from the oak. Syrah is an underdog in California and hard to sell but it proved to be the most popular grape in the under-£30 bracket.

California has a reputation for high-alcohol wines but this tasting came as a surprise; 72% of recommendations came in at less than 14%. They displayed freshness, juiciness and purity of fruit. Originally from Languedoc-Roussillon, the Valdiguié grape offered a 'Napa Gamay' style, while some of the wines made from Cabernet Franc or Rhône varieties were indicative of their cooler-climate homelands.

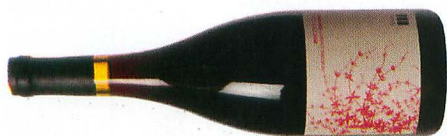
This tasting has been an eye-opener



and it has certainly changed my ideas about good value in California. Try these wines with an open mind and you will be surprised how they will reward you without breaking the bank.

Christelle Guibert is Decanter's tastings director

25 great Californian buys



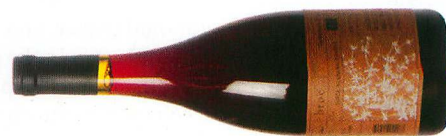
Broc Cellars, Vine Starr Zinfandel, Sonoma County 2012 18.25/20 (94/100) £25.95 **Roberson**

Who would have thought that a Zinfandel would top the list? This grape has never been my top choice, but this is not your average Zin – quite the opposite in fact. First, the alcohol is pretty low for a Zin, resulting in a more elegant style. Pretty black cherry and black pepper aromas backed up by an elegant palate with notes of fresh dark fruit and spice; very full of flavour and quite refined. A must-try for any who turn their nose up at Zinfandel – it will surprise you. **Drink** 2014-2016 **Alcohol** 12.7%



Broc Cellars, Cuvée 13.1 Syrah, Santa Lucia Highlands 2012 18 (93) £21.95 **Roberson**

Cuvée 13.1 refers to the alcohol level – very modest for a Californian Syrah. Grapes are sourced from a small vineyard at a slightly higher altitude in the Santa Lucia Highlands. Picking quite early, when the grapes have flavour but still have low sugar, results in a lower-alcohol style. Partial carbonic fermentation gives a juicy wine with dark fruit, pepper and thyme. Medium-bodied but fresh, vibrant and elegant with spice and minerality on the finish. **Drink** 2014-2016 **Alc** 13.1%



Broc Cellars, Whole Cluster Cabernet Franc, Santa Lucia Highlands 2012 18 (93) £27.95 **Roberson**

A third top recommendation from this urban winery – in terms of value for money, this outfit rocks! It's quite unusual to see a 100% Cabernet Franc in this part of the world. Fermented with the stems, these add spiciness and herbal notes to the final result. Nice perfume and, again, medium weight with some red cherry and cranberry character, and nice white pepper on finish. Very elegant and fresh. **Drink** 2014 **Alc** 11.9%



Arnot-Roberts, Luchsinger Trousseau, Clear Lake 2012 17.75 (92)
 £29.95 **Roberson**
 With the exception of Jura fans, very few will have heard of, let alone tasted, a wine made from Trousseau. Hailing from California this is even more unusual. Almost as pale as a darker rosé, there's plenty of floral character with notes of strawberry and raspberry. Light-bodied with a kick from the tannins; a juicy, refreshing style. **Drink 2014 Alc 12.3%**



Birichino Vino, St Georges Pinot Noir, Central Coast 2012 17.75 (92)
 £22.55 **Christopher Keiller, Prohibition Wines, Swig**
 Grapes sourced close to Santa Cruz Mountains. A small part is whole-cluster fermented with juice from the other grapes poured on top. Raspberry and cranberry aromas with spice. Pretty palate with delicate red fruit and a nice purity; medium weight with peppery finish. Top-value Pinot. **Drink 2014-2016 Alc 13.5%**



Bogle Petite Sirah, California 2011 17.5 (91)
 £14 **Widely available via UK agent Enotria**
 Petite Sirah is a descendant of Syrah and Peloursin from the south of France. Often heavy and tannic, this example is quite the opposite: it's refreshing. The fruit profile is dense with notes of plum, blackberry and black pepper. Great complexity with vibrant fruit characters. **Drink 2014-2016 Alc 13.5%**



Bonny Doon Vineyard, Le Pousseur Syrah, Central Coast 2011 17.5 (91)
 £27 **Berry Bros & Rudd, Whistle Wines**
 The grapes are sourced from cool-climate vineyards in the Santa Maria area and the result is, as expected, fresh and elegant with black fruit characters and a hint of clove. Nice complexity with mellow tannins, fresh black fruit characters and spiciness on the finish. **Drink 2014 Alc 13%**



Domaine de la Terre Rouge, Les Côtes de l'Ouest Syrah, Sierra Foothills 2010 17.5 (91)
 £18 **Bottle Apostle, Butlers Wine Cellar, Corks of Cotham, Fortnum & Mason, Four Walls Wine, St Andrews Wine Co, The Secret Cellar**
 Northern Rhône meets Sierra Foothills. For an entry level wine, it's a very pretty Syrah. The purity combines with peppery and herb notes. A fruit-forward style with precise acidity. Great everyday wine. **Drink 2014 Alc 14.5%**



Decoy, Cabernet Sauvignon, Sonoma County 2011 17.5 (91)
 £26.50-£27.50 **Oddbins, Philglas & Swiggott, Wine Treasury, Wimbledon Wine Cellar**
 Showing that California can produce stellar, complex Cabernet sub-£30, this is rich and inviting with blackcurrant and blackberry fruit notes. The oak is well-integrated and adds a nice spiciness. Very approachable with soft tannins, to enjoy now. **Drink 2014 Alc 13.9%**



Easton, Cabernet Franc, Monarch Mine Vineyard, Sierra Foothills 2011 17.5 (91)
 £21 **Bottle Apostle, Butler's Wine Cellar, St Andrews Wine Co**
 I love Cabernet Franc and this mixes Loire eminence with California depth and power. Lovely savouriness with some minerality and complex herbal characters. Fresh on the palate with red fruit characters. Very impressive with a great price-tag. **Drink 2014-2016 Alc 13.5%**



Copain, Tous Ensemble Syrah, Mendocino County 2011 17.5 (91)
 £24.95 **Roberson**
 As the name 'Tous Ensemble' implies, this is a perfect wine for sharing, over a casual dinner. This great value Syrah is packed with spicy characters and floral notes. Mid-weight with velvety tannins, this has vibrant red fruit perfume on the finish. **Drink 2014-2016 Alc 13.8%**



Eberle Winery, Côtes-du-Rhône, Paso Robles 2009 17.5 (91)
 £20.99-£22.49 **Aged in Oak, Davis Bell McCraith**
 An atypical blend of southern Rhône grapes Mourvèdre, Grenache and Syrah, this resembles the Rhône but with extra muscle from the deep red fruit and oak. It's a charming wine that has freshness and spice and soft tannins too. **Drink 2014-2016 Alc 14.5%**



Etude, Pinot Noir, Carneros 2009 17.5 (91)
 £29.99 **Corking Wines, Frazier's Wine**
 Created by Tony Soter, this was initially an under-funded side project. Now a household name, Etude represents the classic Pinot expression. Fresh berry aromas combine with spice and undergrowth. A polished palate, fresh acidity, refined tannins; harmonious and Burgundian. **Drink 2014-2016 Alc 14.4%** ➤