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Cabs to celebrate the season

Fruit-forward cabernets can easily christen the holiday season

By Bill Daley | Chicago Tribune



Let these cabernet sauvignons help usher in the holiday season (Chicago Tribune/Bill Hogan)

Big is increasingly the word as holidays draw near, especially in the often machismo-charged world of fine wine. Seems every guy with dreams of a cellar starts measuring wine by prices, bottle heft and Robert Parker scores. But is "big" always better?

The latest collection of pricey California cabernet sauvignons just might help answer that question. Soft, fruit-forward and accessible now, these 2006 vintage reds easily can christen the fall/winter holiday season.

"They are balanced and enjoyable," said Master Sommelier Evan Goldstein of the wines. "While I think a number have a way to go, many now are drinking well, a reality of their balance."

Goldstein, president of the San Francisco-based Full Circle Wine Solutions, noted the 2006 cabs may become something of a "forgotten" vintage because of "all the hoopla" directed at the 2007s.

For Baltimore restaurateur Tony Foreman, co-owner and wine director of The Charleston Group, the 2006 cabs are a "soft, generous vintage" and a good restaurant wine because they are more easily paired with food.

"Cab in California, in general, is chasing a very particular style for all but about 10 percent of winemakers," he said. "The style moves more every year toward opulent, fruity, softer, nothing too tannic."

Rick Lewis, owner of the Madison Wine Shop in Madison, Conn., is not a big fan of these cabs.

"Wines from Napa are probably 40 percent to 50 percent higher in price than they ought to be," he said. These "cookie-cutter cabs" that don't realize their full potential are sparking a consumer rebellion, he added, fueled by good, affordably priced wines from Argentina, Chile and Spain.

The vintage is not meant to cellar long, said Foreman, adding that consumers should keep the wines only for five to six years. That may not trouble many Americans, who prefer to drink wines fairly quickly after purchase. The fruit-forward, ready-to-drink quality of a number of 2006s should fit the bill.

Surprisingly smooth and drinkable now

Every fall, the wine-tasting panel meets to do a tasting of expensive California cabernet sauvignon. "Big reds" are what we call them, and frankly, not every taster looks forward to them. Most years, many of the bottles hold tannic monsters needing a decade or so of cellaring to be tamed. Not so with the 2006 vintage.

Whether it was the two-hour decanting or whether California winemakers were just in a mellower mood or working with a distinctly suave crop of grapes, all six bottles tasted were smooth, sophisticated, ready-to-go reds perfect for your holiday table this year. For the first time in the five years of tasting, all six wines earned "very good" ratings.

Pine Ridge Vineyards: A big but balanced Napa cab with berry, spice, cassis flavor notes and a touch of mushroom and earth on the nose. An appealing dark cherry red; mouth filling in a nice way. Serve with beef Burgundy, roast goose, leg of lamb. \$54; three corkscrews.

Adelaida Viking Estate Vineyard: This Paso Robles cab tied with the Rocca for second place. A classic cab, with the slightest bit of woodiness in the beginning followed by jammy berry flavors that end with a touch of chocolate. Serve with rib-eye steak, roast duck with cherries, sweetbreads. \$75; three corkscrews.

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Rocca Family Vineyards: A Napa cabernet with a cherry and cinnamon nose and a velvety berry-cherry flavor. The tannins hold the fruit in proper check. Lovely cherry red color. Serve with braised short ribs, roast turkey, roast beef. \$75; three corkscrews.

Corison: So purple it almost looks like blueberry juice, this Napa cab is smooth and silky, with a nose of plum and incense and a slow-building berry flavor that fades into a long finish. Deceptively powerful. Serve with beef roulade, filet mignon, rack of lamb. \$70; three corkscrews.

Kenwood Jack London Vineyard 30th Anniversary Special Edition: This Sonoma bottling is probably the "oakiest" of them all. Dark chocolate notes and tobacco infuse the flavor. Serve with prime rib, veal roast. \$50; three corkscrews.

Rodney Strong Brothers Ridge: This Sonoma cab smells like earth and cinnamon with a berry flavor dosed with a touch of sweet vanilla. Strong tannins offer balance. Serve with beef Wellington, stir-fried beef with onions, T-bone steak. \$75; three corkscrews.

You want that wine. But your store or area distributor may not choose to carry it. State law may prohibit you from ordering a wine online. What to do? Ask your wine retailer for a wine similar in flavor, style and price.

Ratings key:

- Four corkscrews, excellent
- Three corkscrews, very good
- Two corkscrews, good
- One corkscrew, fair
- No corkscrews, poor

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