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Rich And Powerful Cabernets

- BEST WINES
- TOP VALUES
- RISING STARS

**SEBASTIANI
SAGA:
END OF AN ERA**

**FOOLPROOF
STEAK AND WINE
PAIRINGS**

**THE MAN
BEHIND
YELLOW TAIL**

**MORE THAN
550 WINES
REVIEWED**



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RETROSPECTIVE

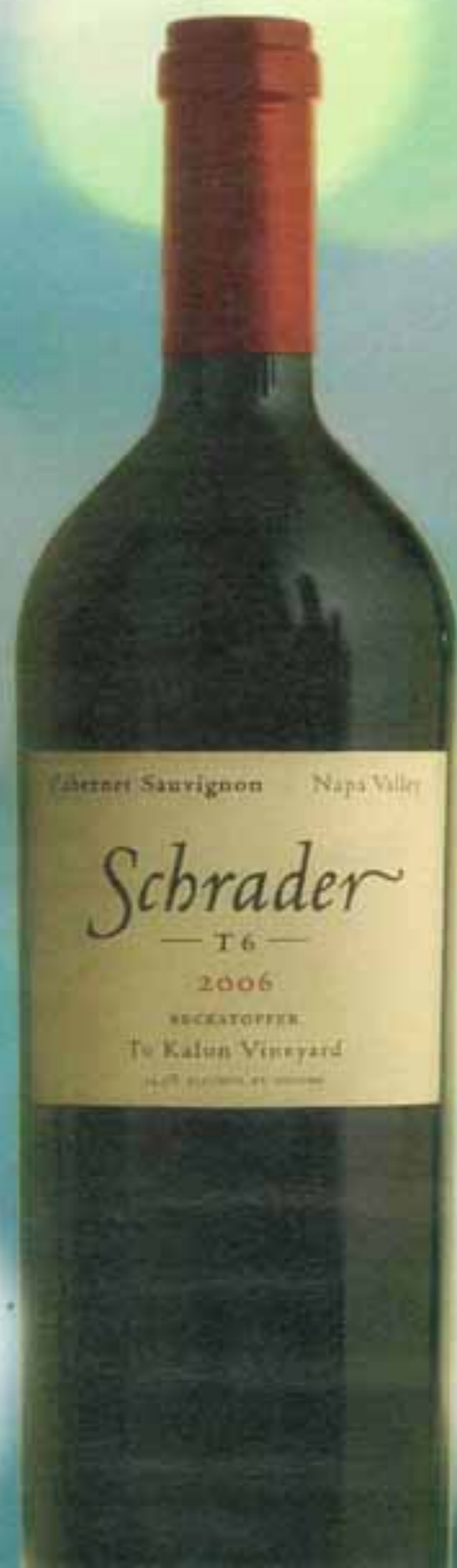
Top-Scoring Wines From the 1999 California Cabernet Retrospective

More than 40 1999 California Cabernets were reviewed for this report. A free alphabetical list of all the wines tasted is available at www.winespectator.com/111509, where WineSpectator.com members can also access complete reviews for the wines.

WINE	SCORE	RELEASE PRICE	CURRENT PRICE
Altamura Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1999 Aging beautifully, with years to go. Pure, rich and concentrated.	95	\$60	\$33
Chappellet Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Pritchard Hill Estate Vineyard 1999 Still a big, ripe, chunky, expressive style, matching power with restraint.	95	\$110	\$NA
Carter Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville Fortuna Block 1999 A big, ripe, expressive style. Dark, rich and layered.	94	\$55	\$NA
Shafer Cabernet Sauvignon Stags Leap District Hillside Select 1999 Combines the richness and power of youth with the subtleties of age.	94	\$150	\$317
Bond Vecina Napa Valley 1999 Pleasantly earthy, firm, dry and structured; flavors fold together nicely.	92	\$150	\$NA
Buoncrisiani Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1999 Fresh, intense and vibrant. Still a tad rustic, but in a good way.	92	\$52	\$NA
Darloush Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1999 Complex and distinctive, this is big, ripe and balanced.	92	\$62	\$NA
Justin Isosceles Paso Robles 1999 Aging well, with excellent balance, depth and focus. Cabernet blend.	92	\$48	\$NA
Robert Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley To Kalon Vineyard Reserve 1999 Complex aromas lead to a distinctive array of flavors. Well-structured.	92	\$150	\$109
Spottswoode Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1999 Firm, intense and spicy, with balanced and concentrated flavors.	92	\$80	\$88
Joseph Phelps Insignia Napa Valley 1999 Complex, with focused flavors that gain depth from midpalate on.	91	\$125	\$91
Provenance Cabernet Sauvignon Rutherford 1999 This has gained in the bottle, aging gracefully. Mature and complex.	91	\$35	\$NA
Whitehall Lane Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Leonardini Vineyard 1999 Rich, intense and full-bodied, this is aging very well. Turns supple and layered.	91	\$85	\$NA
Silverado Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Limited Reserve 1999 A rustic style that's intense and spicy, with a mix of tight, complex flavors.	90	\$95	\$NA
Viader Napa Valley 1999 Elegant, supple, full-bodied, complex and stylish, with fresh, subtle aromas.	90	\$75	\$45

CALIFORNIA
WINEMAKERS
STRIKE GOLD WITH
THIS NEWLY
RELEASED VINTAGE
BY JAMES LAUBE

2006



Cabernet

California is in the midst of a strong run of Cabernet vintages. The wines from 2006—the most recent vintage to be released—mark the third excellent year in a row, and the 2007s, though a year from coming to market, may be the best of the lot. Call it a Cabernet bonanza, with a variety of styles on offer, extending from sleek and elegant to bold and extravagant.



Napa Valley dominates the top tier of bottlings from the exceptional 2006 vintage.



Schrader winemaker Thomas Brown (left) and owner Fred Schrader teamed up to release two nearly perfect Napa Valley Cabernets in 2006. The wines are well-priced for their quality.

Since our last report on the category ("California Cabernet's Win-Win Vintage," Nov. 15, 2008), which focused on the 2005 vintage, we have reviewed nearly 600 new releases from vintages 2004 through 2007. The lion's share of these wines, more than 375, are from 2006, while another 160 hail from 2005. The good news is that there are many great wines to be found, with plenty of bottlings to recommend in the \$50-or-less price range. (A free alphabetical listing of all wines tasted for this report is available at www.winespectator.com/111509.)

The 2006 vintage produced some of the greatest Cabernets in recent history. Thirty wines earned classic ratings of 95 to 100 points on the Wine Spectator 100-point scale, and 180 merited outstanding marks of 90 to 94 points. There are stars aplenty, with sensational offerings from a number of well-known wineries, mostly in Napa Valley.

It was a banner year for esteemed producers such as Bryant Family, Chappeller, Colgin, Dalla Valle, Groth, Lewis, **Robert Mondavi**, Peter Michael, Schrader and Staglin, which all made wines that rated 95 points or higher. Leading the pack, Schrader turned out two 99-pointers.

There are also some exciting newer labels making rapid strides to produce high quality Cabernet. These wineries crafted a number of classic-rated bottlings in 2006: a trio from Hall, two from

During the late-ripening 2006 growing season, winemakers who picked their grapes at optimal ripeness and avoided the fall rains produced grand-slam wines.

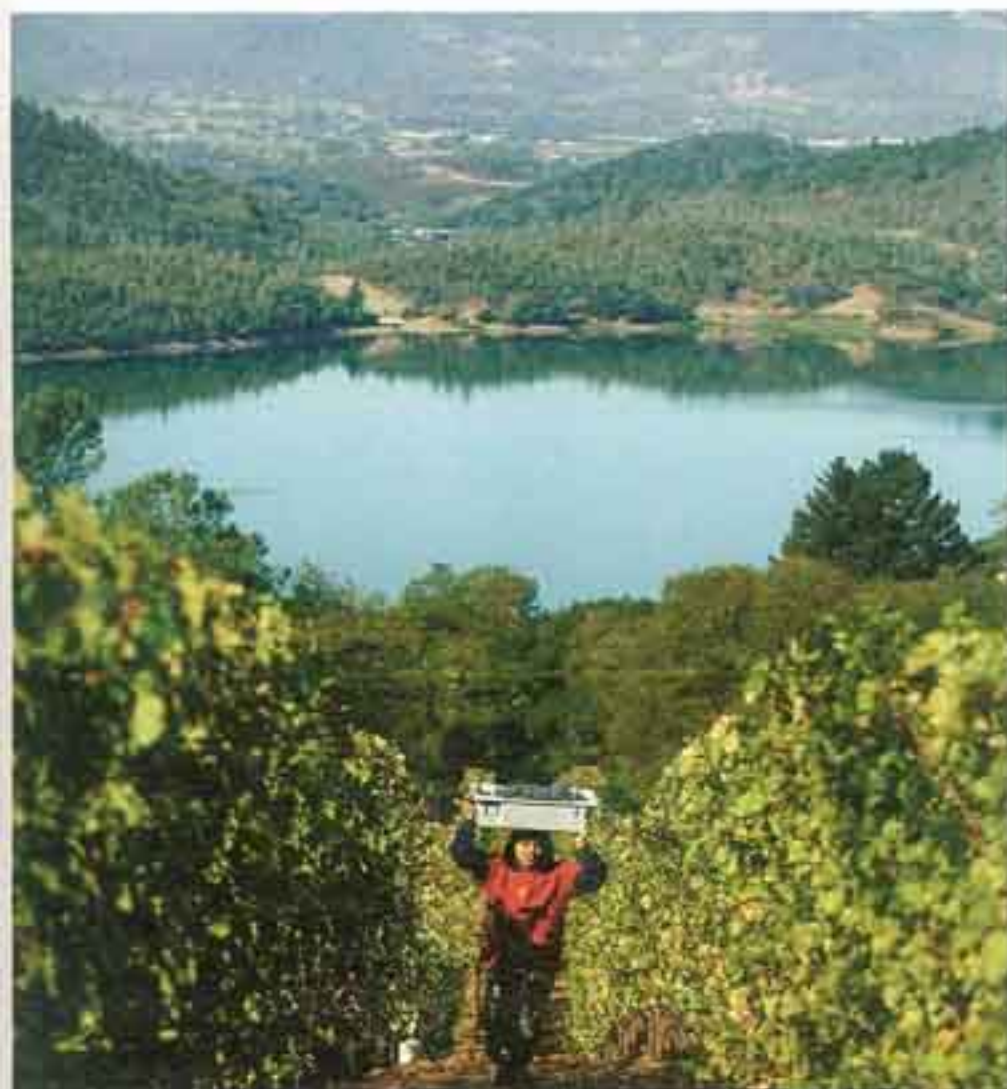
Hourglass, and one each from Continuum, Maybach, Reata, Radius, Scarecrow and Tor. Though most of these wines sell in the \$100 to \$200 range, I also found a few gems that came in at \$50 or less: the Coho Headwaters (95 points, \$40), the Chappeller Signature (94, \$42), the Girard Artistry (92, \$42), the Snowden The Ranch (92, \$40) and the Ramey Claret (91, \$38).

All of these wines are uncommonly rich, flavorful, complex and compelling, exhibiting wonderful balance, finesse, grace and charm. They showcase the ripe, loamy currant, plum and black cherry that are the core flavors of Napa Cabernet, along with a mix of mineral, herb, anise, olive, sage, cedar and cigar box. Yet they range in style from the bold, ripe, well-oaked wines of Schrader, Bryant Family and Hall, to the sleeker versions of Diamond Creek, Mondavi and Continuum, which are tighter in structure and more likely to draw comparisons to the Cabernet-based reds of Bordeaux.

With a few minor exceptions, prices are about the same as they have been the past several vintages. Screaming Eagle 2006 at \$750 a bottle (91 points) is the most expensive wine on release in California, followed by Harlan Estate (94) at \$500. Though many of the top Cabernets check in at more than \$100 a bottle, wines such

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The vineyards of Bryant Family on the slopes of Napa's Pritchard Hill delivered amazing fruit in 2006, yielding a rich, elegant and complex Cabernet that rates among the best wines of the vintage.

as the Schrader T6 Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard 2006 (99, \$125) still deliver exceptional quality for the price. Unfortunately, most of the high-scoring wines with lower price tags—the RADIUS (96, \$62) or the Kathryn Hall bottling from Hall (96, \$75), for example—are produced in small quantities and sell out quickly.

Yet the market for Cabernet has softened. The economic recession has led to slower sales—both through winery mailing lists and at retail—for some elite bottlings and caused restaurants to mark down many wines as well. Though wineries were slow to reduce prices, they appear to be doing so now, as inventories for expensive wines remain high.

Of the vintages since 2004, 2006 proved the most challenging, and not just for Cabernet. The 2006 Merlots, Pinot Noirs and Zinfandels were marked by a difficult growing season and uneven quality. What sets Cabernet apart somewhat is that Cabernet grapes are sturdier and better suited to handle weather extremes. The best sites for the variety are in the warmer areas of Napa Valley and Sonoma County.

"Of the three, 2005 is the biggest surprise," says Thomas Brown, winemaker for Schrader, Maybach, Cass Piana and his own label, Rivers-Marie. "It was a big crop and a big berry year. As the wines were made, they seemed

Rating California Cabernet Vintages in Napa and Sonoma

	Napa	Sonoma		
2008	90-92	84-86	Small crop, with uneven ripening; but could be unique for its depth and concentration	NYR
2007	84-97	87-88	Early signs point to a great year of ripe and supple, yet rich and concentrated wines. Growing conditions were mild and even, with a good crop size	NYR
2006	85	88	A late, cool harvest produced dense, concentrated, structured and ageworthy wines	Drink or hold
2005	92	85	Record-size crop surpassed expectations; may be mixed. Best are elegant and balanced, drinking well now through the next 10 to 15 years	Drink or hold
2004	85	85	Small crop of exceptional quality. Napa wines are ripe, elegant, concentrated and harmonious, with deft balance and ripe tannins	Drink or hold
2003	85	82	Uneven ripeness; austere and tannic in style. More like 2000 than 2001 or 2002	Drink or hold
2002	93	83	Superb in Napa; dense and rich, rivaling 2001 for depth and complexity	Drink or hold
2001	93	87	Excellent weather; many stunning wines but also a few disappointments	Drink or hold
2000	85	81	Mixed and a bit green overall, but some stellar wines that may be overlooked and undervalued	Drink or hold
1999	97	87	Tremendous depth, concentration and structure from a cool, moderate year; ageworthy	Drink or hold
1998	84	82	Cool, damp year produced mostly green, herbal wines marked by gritty tanning; few memorable bottles	Drink
1997	89	90	Huge crop of ripe, opulent, fleshy, concentrated wines, from near-perfect weather	Drink or hold

A score range indicates preliminary analysis based on barrel samples and/or a limited sampling; many wines of the vintage not yet reviewed.

Vintage ratings: 95-100, classic; 90-94, outstanding; 85-89, very good; 80-84, good; 75-79, mediocre; 70-74, not recommended.

Drinkability: "NYR" means the vintage has not yet been released; "drink" means most of the wines of the vintage are ready to drink; "hold" means most of the ageworthy wines have yet to fully mature. Note that most California Cabernets are drinkable within a few years of release.



Look to regions beyond Napa Valley for Cabernet values. The volcanic soils of Obsidian Ridge's vineyards in Lake County produced one of the best bargains of the 2006 vintage.

to be of medium concentration, yet they proceeded to fatten up and gain richness and body. People let the wines come into their own, and [the vintage] ended up being a much better year than expected."

There were close similarities weather-wise between the 2005 and 2006 vintages—both years were long, drawn-out seasons that followed unusually rainy winters—and even the cluster counts were similar. But in 2006, says Brown, "The berries ended up being much smaller and [the wines] more concentrated."

"2006 was a cool vintage, but not as cold as '05," says vintner David Ramey. "The crop was not as large as '05, so there's greater color, tannin and density. In a way, '06 reminds me of '99, with the same density and color. It has taken the '99s a long time to come around. I think '06 will pay off some cellaring, in comparison with '02 or '04, which were rich, plush, charming vintages from the beginning."

"It was a classic Napa Valley harvest for the Bordeaux varieties," says Philippe Melka, who makes wine under his eponymous label, along with serving as winemaker for a number of other wineries, including Gemstone, Hundred Acre and newcomer Dana. "The yields were lower than in 2005. The wines are rich and well-structured, with big tannins. Tannin management has been the key to success [in recent years]."

Tannin management—that is, making



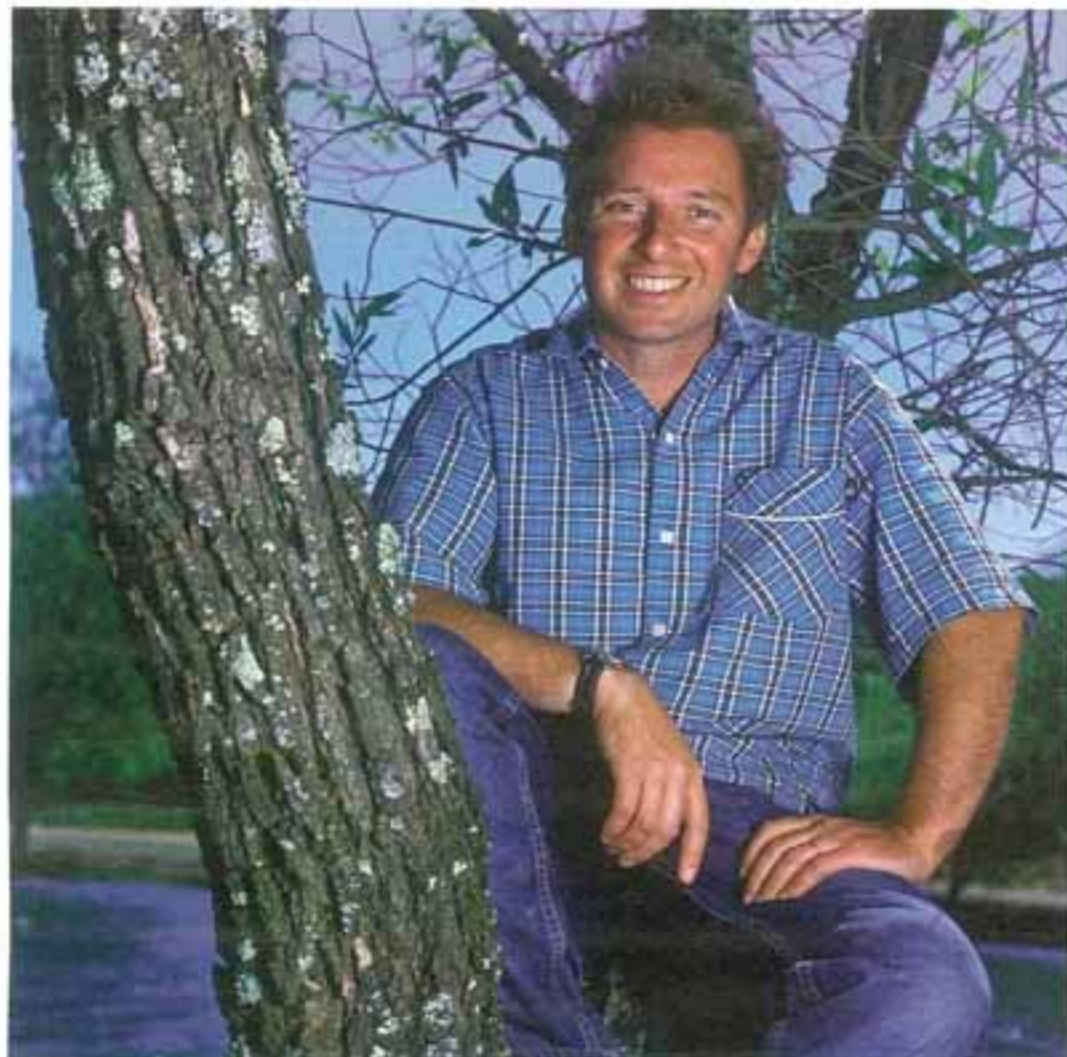
sure the grape skins are soft and ripe and do not display greener, herbal notes or astringent tannins—is particularly important in a cool year such as 2006, when getting thick-skinned Cabernet grapes ripe is crucial to achieving flavor and quality. "Tannin management was the key," Brown confirms.

Winemakers agree that patience was required in 2006, given the late-ripening season. The growing period was long and mostly mild—save a searing heat wave in mid-July that sent temperatures soaring past 100° F—and picking extended into late October and early November. The last two weeks of October were the saving grace for most vintners, as warm weather arrived, extending the harvest before the onset of fall rains.

Because of the late harvest, those who picked their grapes at optimal ripeness and avoided the rains produced grand-slam wines that are uniformly rich, opulent, layered, plush and concentrated. Brown says he knew when he pressed the wines that they would turn out great.

Those who did not want to pick late for a second year in a row may have harvested too early. "There are some really coarse wines out there," Brown says. "It's a little hard for me to say why. Some people did not want to hang [their grapes] out there that long and maybe pulled a bit early."

What this vintage subplot makes clear is that despite its overall success, the year



Winemaker Philippe Melka believes that keeping the big tannins of Cabernet grapes under control has been key to success in recent years.

On the horizon is the 2007 vintage, which winemakers say could be one of the greatest years across the board for all varietals.

wasn't easy pickings for everyone. With the long, cool growing season presenting challenges of how long to hang grapes and when to pick, winemakers were faced with tough choices. Though most timed harvest right, a few appear to have missed, if ever so slightly. There are some wines that have harder, greener tannins, while others are extremely tight and closed, showing earthier tannins. I expect that many of these wines will be more forthcoming after a year or two. The best 2006s, on the other hand, are intense, dense and structured, making this a vintage that should reward cellaring.



On the horizon is 2007, which winemakers say could be one of the greatest vintages across the board for all varietals. The growing season was smooth. Spring rains ended early, Cabernet threw a medium-sized crop, and winemakers were able to

control vine vigor and keep the crop at desired levels. When winemakers compare bottled 2006 Cabernets with barrels of 2007, they say the '07s are every bit as good if not better than the '06s.

"It is everything and anything laudatory you can say," says Brown, adding that the wines have "incredible fruit without sacrificing backbone, tannin and acidity."

In terms of drinkability, Brown and other winemakers say that of the past five vintages, 2004 is the ripest and will mature early; 2005, a huge crop of excellent quality, should develop sooner than 2006; and 2007 should drink well from the start.

That early-drinking allure of California Cabernet is a big plus for those who enjoy the fresh, ripe complexity of a young wine. But the best wines will age well and improve for a decade or two if they're stored properly.

Winemakers seem to have confronted the ripeness issue, and certainly the subject is on everyone's mind. Critics of Cabernet, as well as other California wines, maintain that the wines

are too ripe and alcoholic; in fact, the 2005, 2006 and 2007 vintages saw wines with slightly lower alcohol levels than in previous years (2001, 2002 and 2004 in particular). But vintners are not changing their wines to make Cabernet in the old Bordeaux style of 12.5 percent to 13 percent alcohol. Grapes in California don't have enough flavor to be harvested at sugar levels that translate to those degrees of alcohol.

The key, winemakers explain, is balance, and on the whole this has been a great stretch of vintages. "We haven't had a mediocre vintage since 2000—and 2000 was definitely a mediocre year," Ramey says. "What we have is a run of good vintages with different characteristics."

Even the 2008 vintage, now resting in the cellars, could surprise with its quality. The crop was small—off by nearly 50 percent in some vineyards, due to a hard spring frost—but the berries were small as well, giving the wines great density. "I can't speak to its charm yet," Ramey says.

A little something for everyone who drinks Cabernet.

Senior editor James Laube, based in Napa, is Wine Spectator's lead taster on the wines of California.

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BONUS VIDEOS: Watch the California Cabernet video series and meet some of the state's top winemakers at www.winespectator.com/video/calcab.

James Laube's Recommended California Cabernets

Nearly 600 wines were reviewed for this report. A free alphabetical list is available at www.winespectator.com/111509. WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

TOP WINES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
SCHRADER Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard MM VI 2006 An incredible mix of opulence and restraint, offering ripe, seductive currant and blackberry fruit that's full-bodied and complex, turning elegant and refined on the finish.	99	\$300/ 1.5L
SCHRADER Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley T6 Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard 2006 A masterpiece. Capturing currant and blackberry fruit at the zenith of ripeness, this is smooth, plush and layered, with a mix of mocha, black cherry, currant and wild berry.	99	\$125
BRYANT FAMILY Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2006 Delightfully complex, elegant, rich and subtle, with ripe, spicy currant, black cherry and plum that's pure and focused, supple and juicy. Shows great balance and concentration.	98	\$325
COLGIN IX Estate Napa Valley 2006 A stunning effort that offers a rich, layered band of ripe currant and green and black olive, with hints of herb and spice. Expands into a long, deep, penetrating finish.	97	\$290
HOURGLASS Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2006 A stunning, seductive style that features layers of creamy oak, dried currant, plum and mocha. Turns smooth and polished, unlocking doors of hazelnut and spice.	97	\$135
HOURGLASS Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Blueline Vineyard 2006 Captures the richness, power, finesse and grace of Cabernet, delivering an up-front, exotic display of ripe currant, blackberry, wild berry, plum, olive, cedar and spice.	97	\$125
CHAPPELLET Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Pritchard Hill Estate Vineyard 2006 Firm and concentrated, with taut, vibrant mineral, blackberry, wild berry and black cherry fruit that gives this a rich core of flavors. Deep and concentrated.	96	\$135
HALL Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Jack's Masterpiece 2006 Amazing for its complex mix of flavors, ranging from mint, herb, loamy earth, dried currant, black cherry and berry fruit.	96	\$70
HALL Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Kathryn Hall 2006 A big, dense wine, with currant and blackberry flavors and savory herb and earth nuances that provide a solid foundation.	96	\$75
MAYBACH Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville Materlum Weitz Vineyard 2006 Rich, layered and elegant, delivering supple currant and blackberry, with touches of anise, cedar and mineral.	96	\$110
ROBERT MONDAVI Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Reserve 2006 Pure, rich and concentrated, this bold, graceful wine offers a deep core of earthy currant, blackberry and plum.	96	\$135
REALM Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard 2006 Shows wonderful purity of flavor and focus, with rich, deep, concentrated black cherry, blackberry, currant and plum.	96	\$115

TOP WINES (continued)

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
RUDIUS Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2006 Intense, vibrant, rich and expansive, with tiers of tightly focused currant, plum and black cherry fruit.	96	\$62
SCARECROW Cabernet Sauvignon Rutherford 2006 A gorgeous young wine, fresh, pure, rich and vibrant, offering tiers of ripe, juicy cherry, currant, plum and berry.	96	\$175
SCHRADER Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Gill Beckstoffer Georges III Vineyard 2006 Seductive in its overlay of rich, concentrated flavors, with currant, black cherry and blackberry fruit and creamy oak.	96	\$125
STAGLIN Cabernet Sauvignon Rutherford 2006 Focused and supple, showing amazing purity of flavor, with black currant, black cherry, mineral, sage, anise and cedar.	96	\$175
CONTINUUM Oakville 2006 Offers rich dark chocolate, mocha and espresso, with ripe, currant-laced Cabernet fruit. Elegant. Cabernet blend.	95	\$140
DALLA VALLE Maya Napa Valley 2006 Tight, firm and structured, with a rich, focused beam of blackberry, black cherry, currant, herb and anise. Cabernet blend.	95	\$200
DANCING HARES Napa Valley 2005 Shows wonderful richness, depth and concentration, with pure currant, black cherry and berry fruit. Cabernet blend.	95	\$95
GROTH Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville Reserve 2006 Pure, rich and focused, full-bodied and concentrated, showing firm black cherry and blackberry fruit.	95	\$150
HALL Cabernet Sauvignon Diamond Mountain District 2005 A rich, deep, plush expression of Cabernet, revealing layers of loamy earth, herb, currant, mocha, cedar, tar and spice.	95	\$100
HALL Exzellenz Sacrashe Vineyard Rutherford 2006 Pure, ripe, rich and complex, with currant, plum and black cherry fruit that's intense and supple, balanced and persistent.	95	\$150
HUNDRED ACRE Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Kayli Morgan Vineyard 2006 Shows wonderful purity of flavor, with mocha-laced currant, kirsch liqueur, blackberry and wild berry fruit.	95	\$300
LEWIS Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Hillstone Vineyard 2006 A seductive style shaped by creamy vanilla-tinged oak. Complex and intense, offering pure, ripe Cabernet fruit.	95	\$125
LEWIS Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Reserve 2006 Pure, rich and focused on a beam of ripe plum, cherry and currant, with anise and cedar. Complex, deep and persistent.	95	\$125
LEWIS Cuvee L Napa Valley 2005 Taut, intense and vibrant, with dried currant, mineral, sage and cedary oak flavors. Pure and focused. Cabernet blend.	95	\$225
PETER MICHAEL Les Pavots Knights Valley 2006 Focused, supple and harmonious, with ripe plum, currant, black licorice, cedar and cigar box. Cabernet blend.	95	\$175