

# CALIFORNIA RETHINK

Reckon that California's wines are too expensive, too alcoholic, too oaky and impossible to pair with food? Wrong, wrong, wrong and wrong, says **Anne Krebiehl** as she meets the producers and sommeliers doing great things with the Golden State's wines

As contradictions go, California is right up there. While the Golden State usually triggers images of sunshine, breathtaking vistas, cool surfers and Hollywood, Californian wine is still seen as being split Jekyll-and-Hyde-like into Pink Zin and Cult Cabernet.

Though many top steakhouses are now championing Californian wines, several outdated myths persist – so it's time they were debunked.

Canvassing sommeliers, we consistently heard 'there are no mid-priced wines in California', the wines are 'too expensive, too oaky, too alcoholic', 'it is all very corporate', 'such wines simply do not work with our food' and the 'Californians prefer to keep their good stuff to themselves'.

In reality, California is almost as long as Italy, covers 10° of latitude, has countless mesoclimates within 116 federally approved American Viticultural Areas (AVAs) and has scores of winemakers who are way cooler than any beach bum.

## PRIDE & PREJUDICE

James Hocking, director of wine at California importer Vineyard Cellars,

experiences these prejudices on a daily basis. He admits 'many exist because, regrettably, in some cases they are true'. But while partially correct, he thinks 'they are also a sommelier's cop-out. Those people haven't done their homework'.

Two people who have done that homework are Vanessa Cinti, head sommelier at Cut at 45 Park Lane and Christian Jacobsen, head sommelier and

## CALIFORNIA IS PROBABLY THE ONLY NEW WORLD REGION WITH A REALLY STRONG DOMESTIC MARKET

operations manager at MASH in Soho. Both venues are steak houses with strong Californian lists. Crucially, both Cinti and Jacobsen came to London to open them with firm knowledge and experience of California and no typical UK prejudices.

'We have great wines from £30,' says Cinti: 'We can find good wine at a good price.'

Jacobsen agrees but concedes that 'in order to get the mid-range you need to be proactive, and here at MASH we are.'

This, of course, is down to naked economic facts: California is probably the only New World region with a really strong domestic market and is, therefore, not dependent on exporting. Some wineries can sell 50% of their output at the cellar door and numerous boutique outfits work via oversubscribed mailing lists – and that goes for Chardonnay, Pinot and Syrah as well as for Cab Sauv.

Global retail brands are, of course, widely distributed, but of limited interest to the on-trade; fine wine producers want to be represented in prestigious restaurants internationally, but a huge number of smaller producers simply don't export.

Jacobsen – who initially found the UK 'not really geared towards American wines' – sees this as a market gap. While he still uses some of his Danish suppliers (MASH is the London outpost of a five-strong Danish chain) for *recherche* wines, he is working with UK importers to broaden portfolios: 'There is a big opportunity. There are so many exciting producers and we are only showing a handful of them! When I compare them





to European wines in quality and price, California is definitely up there.'

Hocking, whose on-trade prices start at £6 for 'decent-value wines that hold their own with comparatively-priced wines from elsewhere', also introduces a whole new idea of value. 15 years ago he sold high-end Napa Cab from Colgin or Harlan Estate at £400 a case when Lynch-Bages from a good vintage cost £250 a case. 'Now Bordeaux prices are at a ridiculous level, people look to Napa for alternative, ultra-high-end wines because the prestige and quality is there. Decent Napa Cabernet now offers value for money.'

### CAB SAVVY

Napa Valley Cab has been both California's calling card and the main culprit behind the myths. Yet, Napa produces only 4% of California's wine and there are big stylistic differences between winemakers and AVAs.

Cathy Corison, maker of long-lived, eponymous Cabernets says: 'Napa Valley Cabernet is going to be powerful, that's a given; but it's more interesting at the intersection of elegance.' Her wines embody the gravelly benchlands of Rutherford. And Cabernets from Napa's mountain AVAs are very different, too.

Neither is Californian Cab the only go-to variety for juicy, American-style steaks. Jacobsen explains: 'Our Uruguayan beef is from young cattle, very light and spicy, and it goes beautifully with light red wines with higher acidity such as Pinot Noir. American beef is from

older cattle, slaughtered at 30 months. It's more flavourful, intense, fatty and structured, so you need a more solid wine like Cabernet Sauvignon or Syrah. The sweetness of the fruit works with the sweetness of the corn-fed meat.

'Our Danish cattle is dry-aged for 70 days. It's firmer, almost gamey and takes on varieties such as Petit Verdot, Cabernet Franc or Syrah. The Australian beef is Wagyu, a speciality in itself: very elegant, not big and bold. It has a very high fat-marbling but is fine-grained – it calls for elegance and, again, Pinot Noir is perfect.'

Cinti rightly cautions that 'some producers still use big oak and big fruit because, remember, wine is for everybody.

## 'WITH BORDEAUX PRICES NOW AT A RIDICULOUS LEVEL, NAPA CAB OFFERS VALUE FOR MONEY' JAMES HOCKING

Some people like this and my job is to make everybody comfortable!' She is equally inclusive when it comes to Californian Chardonnay.

### CHARDONNAY FOR ALL

'People love the diversity: California produces balanced, acidic Chardonnay and old-school Chardonnay with buttery, oaky popcorn flavours. I have and love both styles. A great pairing for this 'popcorn' style is sashimi of wagyu beef, with balsamic reduction, dried dates and cherries,' says Cinti.

James Doidge, managing director at specialist importer The Wine Treasury,

agrees that 'winemakers still use a fair amount of oak, but judiciously, with wines that have sufficient structure and power to take it – such as Flowers Chardonnay from the Sonoma Coast.' With Chardonnay, Doidge has also noticed 'more and more wines that don't go through malolactic fermentation,' such as Mer Soleil's unoaked 'Silver' from Monterey County.

Chardonnay is also one of the reasons California has been a star performer for Berkman Wine Cellars. Purchasing director Alex Hunt MW comments that 'sale volumes of premium Californian wines [ie over £6 wholesale] have risen by 95% year-on-year.' He believes this success is down to 'the gradual erosion of negative perceptions of Californian wine, coupled with an active, positive renewed interest in American-style dining, of which wine is an integral part.'

### PINOT POTENTIAL

Ever since the film *Sideways* flickered across screens in 2004, Pinot Noir replaced Merlot in the popularity stakes. Pinot

has a crowd-pleasing versatility, but Cinti also loves its ability to reflect specific sites in California, just like it does in Burgundy.

'California has a huge amount of microclimates and an incredible number of different Pinots,' she says. Central Coast Pinot Noirs from Au Bon Climat need no introduction; neither do famous names such as Littorai, Flowers or Schug from Sonoma. Up-and-coming is foggy, redwood-covered Anderson Valley in Mendocino, also home to Roederer's classy traditional-method sparkler Quartet. Here, timber and apples are as important as vines. Michael Fay, winemaker at Goldeneye in Anderson Valley says: 'The wines embody the



region—there's elegance to Anderson Valley Pinot Noir, at the same time there's a deep, rustic power that echoes the place.'

Jacobsen champions both Pinot and its boutique producers: 'Land values are ridiculous, but you do have grower-producer relations. If you're a young producer you rent yourself into a crush-pad, share facilities, buy grapes and make your own wine. California is a land of possibilities.'

This set-up enables many who don't own land to craft wines, especially from rarer varieties that sommeliers can play with. Cinti pairs Alban Vineyards Viognier from Edna Valley with braised veal tongue; while Daniel Britz, restaurant manager at Lime Wood in Lyndhurst matches chargrilled brill and borlotti beans with Qupe's Santa Maria Valley Marsanne.

Wines like this put paid to the notion that California is a) corporate and b) dominated by the big two grapes. Indeed, according to the Preliminary CDFA Grape Crush Report, Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon only represented 16.8% and 11.3% of California's 2012 crush respectively. Even in Napa Valley where land prices are astronomical, 95% of wineries are still family-owned.

### VERSATILE ZIN

California's unique and most authentic varietal represents only 10.3% of the total 2012 crush. Some Zinfandel vineyards survived Prohibition and 1980s phylloxera and wines like Ridge's Geyserville have shown the elegance it is capable of.

Alan Holmes, wine and restaurant director at The Vineyard at Stockcross, is imaginative in his pairings. 'We use Zin with game, especially venison with chocolate in the sauce. It works beautifully

with that mixture of sweetness, spice and savouriness you get from very dark chocolate,' he explains. 'I use it wherever there's a little sweetness, say alongside beef salad in raspberry vinaigrette.'

The sweeter styles with residual sugar, Holmes finds, 'work with very high-grade baked or cooked chocolate desserts that are actually more savoury than sweet.'

Moving to Asian cuisine, Igor Sotric, head sommelier at China Tang, pairs Cline Ancient Vines Zinfandel with five-spice marinated black salt and pepper beef; while Flavio Carenzi, head bartender at Nobu Berkeley Street, matches Seghesio Zinfandel with sweet and spicy-sauced aromatic meat dishes such as lamb anticucho miso.

### THE ABV FACTOR

Across the board, there has been a move to rein in those famous alcohol levels. Birichino's winemaker John Locke

confesses: 'I am a total wuss when it comes to alcohol in wines. I generally find noticeable alcohol distracting and, perhaps more grievous, fatiguing to the wine-drinking experience.'

About his aromatic Grenache, a varietal that always tends towards alcoholic heat, Locke says: 'We find plenty of perfume, depth of flavour, persistence and complexity in the wine at 13.5%-14% abv.' His delicate, bargain Malvasia from Monterey comes in at a mere 12.5% abv and is clearly made for the table. 'There's a vague hint of mint in the wine that allows it to marry with kitchen herbs,' he says. 'Pesto and Malvasia is frighteningly good.'

California produces 90% of all US-grown wine. In 2012, 66% of California wine was crushed in the Central Valley (San Joaquin, Sacramento, Madera, Fresno Counties et al) – this is where the branded, entry-level wines originate that represent 80% of total California imports to the UK.

This leaves just 34% to the long coastline and valleys and most of the wine produced here is strikingly diverse, covering everything from Albariño to Zinfandel. That amounts to roughly 14% of Italy's total output, or a little less than Portugal's annual production.

Big? Corporate? Characterless? Go figure, as they say in the States... 🍷

To try some of these new-wave wines save a date for the Wines of California tasting on 17 March 2014. See [imbibe.com](http://imbibe.com) for info.

## TALKING CALIFORNIA

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