

# The Washington Post

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 30, 1996

But where Cabernet Sauvignon is concerned, American bottlings have the world on the ropes. California has been cranking out roughly three dozen wines for five straight years that merit inclusion among the world's top renditions of Cabernet. No region but Bordeaux can even approach this breadth of excellence. And while Bordeaux remains supreme for aromatic complexity and proven cellaring potential, California Cabernets are tops for purity, richness, early accessibility and consistency from year to year.

Each of these virtues is readily apparent in the premium 1993 Cabernets. Some critics predicted a weak vintage, but the '93s have proved them wrong with wonderful balance and depth. Like '91, which also was widely underrated, '93 was relatively cool with a fairly late harvest. This spells trouble in Bordeaux, which is usually hit by storms in late September. But under the intense California sun, an early harvest often means a quick but superficial ripeness rather than the intricate aromas and flavors that can develop only over a prolonged growing season.

Many delicious but expensive wines from my tastings of 120 Cabernets from 1993 did not make the cut, since the objective was to pick the best wines at various price points. They are listed in order of preference, and sticker shock will diminish as you go down the list (D.C. wholesalers listed):

**Opus One Napa Valley (\$80):** It is probably irrational to pay \$80 for any bottle, but this is one wine that could really loosen your grip on rationality. It is breathtakingly symmetrical and balanced, with ripe

**Corison Wines Napa Valley (\$32):** A brilliant wine built around a core of plum and black cherry fruit of almost eerie purity. Supported by

subtle oak and fine-grained, supple tannins, this is immensely charming stuff. (Bacchus)

**Judd's Hill (Finkelstein Vineyards) Napa Valley (\$32):** Deep, dark, rich and luscious—an object lesson in what is going right in California these days. The classic cassis and chocolate flavors are ripe but not jammy, attaining definition and focus in combination with tannins that are forceful but never harsh. (Constantine and MacArthur Beverages)

**Justin Vineyards San Luis Obispo County "Isosceles Reserve" (\$28):** With an hour of airing, this emerges as a massive, thick, intense wine with vaguely sweet but perfectly pure fruit. Fresh scents of plums and blackberries are set off against an earthy tobacco note. (Washington Wholesale)

**Pride Mountain Vineyards Napa Valley (\$24):** Young wines rarely display detailed aromas, but this already shows black cherry, toasty oak, anise, even whiffs of lead pencil and bay leaf. Intense but polished, this is great juice. (Bacchus)

**Swanson Vineyards Napa Valley (\$22.50):** Succulent cassis and black cherry fruit with a touch of cocoa and seamlessly integrated oak. Perfectly rounded tannins lend focus to the ripe fruit without impeding immediate enjoyment. (Bacchus)

**Truchard Vineyards Carneros Napa Valley (\$21):** Lush but well defined, with plums, black cherries and a nice herbal tinge. Outstanding balance and purity. (Laurent)

**Saucelito Canyon Vineyard Arroyo Grande (\$17):** Soft and smooth but nevertheless robustly flavored, with blackberry fruit and lightly toasty oak. An excellent value. (Country Vintner)