

Not the Usual California Suspects

Written by Bill Citara - BT Contributor
June 2012

Red, white, and you: Agreeable wine for \$12 or less



Say “California wine country” and most people will likely think of Napa and Sonoma and... well, and nothing.

But the California wine country is an awfully big place, some 526,000 acres of vineyards, according to the Wine Institute, of which the big dogs of Napa and Sonoma comprise only about 100,000 acres or so, meaning there’s a lot of grapes in the ground we haven’t even considered.

So consider we will, two counties to the north and east of Napa and Sonoma: Mendocino and Lake. Mendocino County is huge, almost 4000 square miles, with about 17,000 acres of vineyard.

It’s hugely diverse in climate, soils, and grapes, too, from the cool-weather Anderson Valley AVA (American Viticultural Area) on the coast, home to such varietals as Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Riesling, and Gewurztraminer (most, sadly, beyond our budget), to the eastern and much

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warmer Mendocino AVA, where Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah, and Zinfandel are the main grapes. It's also considered the birthplace of organic-wine growing.

Lake County is considerably smaller, about one-third the size of Mendocino, with about half as much vineyard land, though that is expected to increase dramatically in the coming years. Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc are the two most prominent grapes, though red varietals like Petite Syrah, Syrah, Tempranillo, and Zinfandel are carving out their own niches in the local wine universe.

A pair of Lake County Sauvignon Blancs split the difference between the austere, grapefruity New Zealand style and fleshier, fuller-bodied SBs that often come from Napa and Sonoma. The **2010 Pellegrini**

displays aromas of lemons, grapefruit, and oranges with a bit of floral richness. In the mouth it's fuller still, with a lemony acidity to the backbone, and soft citrus and vaguely tropical fruit flavors. Combined with an almost creamy texture, it can stand up to meaty fish like tuna and salmon, and even roasted chicken.

Bonterra Vineyards was one of the first California wineries to get serious about organic- and biodynamic-wine growing. (Certified biodynamic vineyards exceed the "organic" classification by requiring a very high level of agricultural sustainability.)

Like all of Bonterra's wines, the **2010 Sauvignon Blanc** is produced from 100-percent organic grapes, 58 percent from Lake County and 42 percent from Mendocino. It starts off with a fresh, citrusy nose with grassy, herbaceous nuances, then moves on to enhance its lemon-lime-grapefruit flavors with richer notes of orange and, like it says on the label, kiwi. Crisp, clean, simple, and quite refreshing, it's an excellent wine with seafood.

Two Lake County reds show off the deep, fruity, full-bodied character of the area's red wine varietals. The **2009 Shannon Ridge Cabernet Sauvignon** is a rich, royal purple, delivering an aromatic shot of black and red cherries, blueberries, anise, and oak. It takes a while to mellow in the glass, but when it does, you get a powerful taste of ripe black and blueberry fruit that's a heavenly match for chocolate.

Just as potent, but with more complexity, is the **2010 Dalliance**, which blends Zinfandel,

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Barbera, Syrah, Tempranillo, and Grenache to create a really unique flavor profile. It's a big sucker, too -- 14.5 percent alcohol -- and along with gobs of blackberry and blueberry fruit, it fools around with cloves, allspice, and sweet-smoky oak. If you're looking for a wine to go with that New York strip fresh off the grill, you just found it.

Bonterra blends Mendocino and Lake County grapes again in its **2009 Cabernet Sauvignon**, a still young-tasting wine that benefits from its (relatively) low 13.5 percent alcohol level. Nothing wimpy about this organic Cab. It fills the nose with aromas of black and blue fruit, figs, anise, and allspice, though on the palate its fruit is more tangy than intense, which highlights its abundant spicy undercurrents.

We're cheating just a tiny bit on the last wine, because such fine coastal Mendocino Pinot Noirs like Standish, Littorai, and Navarro are beyond our financial grasp. The **2010 Angeline Pinot Noir** uses grapes from Santa Barbara, Sonoma, and Mendocino, and delivers a remarkably Burgundian experience for an equally remarkable \$11.99 price tag.

Pop the cork and it smells of fresh raspberries and strawberries and red cherries with a trace of that characteristic Burgundy funk. It's even more of a treat for the palate, with those cherry-berry flavors given complexity by hints of olives, tobacco, and toast, proof that the little guys can run with the big dogs just fine, thank you.

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