Our 100 most amazing Sonoma County wines in 2022

The Press Democrat · December 16, 2022

https://www.pressdemocrat.com/2022/12/16/our-100-most-amazing-sonoma-county-wines-in-2022/

What makes an amazing wine? Sheer quality, of course. Deliciousness. Mouth-pleasing texture. Fascinating aromas and flavors. Refreshing finish. Five hundred wines could have easily made our 100 Amazing Wines based on these parameters alone; Sonoma wines are that good.

So winnowing to 100 required unveiling the layers of the wines under consideration and revealing the stories behind them, the exciting newcomers, the emerging winegrowing regions and grape varieties and the everything-old-is-new-again ways in which some winemakers impact drinking trends. Which wine lovers don't enjoy a good story behind the label?

Quick Index:

- Sparkling Wines
- Sauvignon Blancs

7 sparkling wines

Breathless Wines Late Disgorged Sonoma County Brut ($75)

The longer a traditional-method bubbly producer has been in business, the more time it's had to build up a stock of blending wines and age the bottled wines while they undergo secondary fermentation (which creates the carbonation). This one was bottled 10 years ago, in contact with the yeast lees, allowing it to gain richness and Champagne's benchmark fresh-baked-bread complexity. Sisters Sharon Cohn, Rebecca Faust and Cynthia Faust started Breathless in 2008 to honor their mother, Martha Jane Faust, who died of a rare respiratory condition. With unofficial sister and winemaker Penny Gadd-Coster, they waited a decade-plus to release this sparkler, and it was well worth the wait for consumers who appreciate a late-disgorged style. For fans of fruitier, zippy-fresh sparklers, the Sonoma County Brut ($29) is a fine quaff.

Brick & Mortar Wines 2021 VP Sonoma Coast Rosé Brut Nature ($30)

Matt and Alexis Iaconis — he's a winemaker, she's a former sommelier/wine director for Barndiva and Meadowoood Resort — produce a range of small-lot wines from the Sonoma Coast, Napa Valley and Mendocino's Anderson Valley and Mendocino Ridge AVAs. From their home and winemaking base in Healdsburg, they bottled this vin pétillant — a pinot noir/chardonnay blend for which fermentation occurs naturally in the bottle once it's capped, creating the carbonation. Not as complex as methode traditionelle Champagne-style bubblies, it's accessible upon release, needs no cellaring and is delicious for its vibrant strawberry, cherry and red-apple flavors. Still wines also run deep for them, with a 2020 West Block Petaluma Gap Syrah ($36) offering a pure, less-is-more expression of dark berries, savory earthiness and freshness.



Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat

Flaunt Wine Co. 2017 Russian River Valley Brut. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)

Flaunt Wine Co. 2017 Russian River Valley Brut ($48)

Texas native Dianna Novy earned her winemaking stripes through the Siduri Wines brand she and Adam Lee founded in 1994 and sold to Jackson Family Wines in 2015. Novy segued to her Flaunt brand, which began with this finessed, Champagne-quality sparkling wine and now includes still pinot noirs and a pinot noir rosé. The brut is comprised of 58% pinot noir and 42% chardonnay and aged on the spent yeast cells for three years; this contributes fresh-baked bread aromas and a creamy midpalate to this elegant, refined bubbly.

Gloria Ferrer Wines 2012 Carneros Cuvée Late Disgorged Carneros Brut ($88)

This Best of Show Sparkling Wine at the 2022 North Coast Wine Challenge wowed judges, including me, with its delicate brioche notes that add depth to the crisp citrus and peach flavors. The wine rested in the cellar for eight-plus years before it was disgorged — the process by which the fermentation yeast is removed from the bottle and the cork inserted. The later a methode traditionelle sparkling wine is disgorged, the longer the yeast can work its magic to add richness. Jose and Gloria Ferrer opened the winery in 1986, and it's produced millions of bottles of bubbly since. Another top choice is the nonvintage Blanc de Noirs Carneros Rosé ($28), widely available and often discounted.



Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat

Iron Horse Vineyards 2014 Stargazing Cuvée Green Valley of Russian River Valley Brut. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)

Iron Horse Vineyards 2014 Stargazing Cuvée Green Valley of Russian River Valley Brut ($195/1.5 liters)

The Sterling family continues to expand its bubbly offerings, some with charitable tie-ins, others with striking labels and all of them capturing the bright, sunny fruitiness of Sonoma County grapes and the methode-traditionelle depth of Champagne. New to the lineup is this Stargazing Cuvée, bottled only in magnums (1.5 liters) and with a label depicting an image captured by the James Webb Space Telescope. Iron Horse co-founder Audrey Sterling is said to have come up with the name for this 2014 vintage sparkler; the tiny, precise bubbles of this blend of pinot noir and chardonnay suggest Dom Perignon-like stars (a reference understood by Champagne devotees).

Also worthy is the 2018 Gratitude ($72), a chardonnay-based bubbly from which $5 of sales go to the Redwood Empire Food Bank, and Iron Horse's most popular sparkler, the pink-hued, berry-scented 2018 Wedding Cuvée ($56).



Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat

Joseph Jewell Wines 2021 Raymond Burr Vineyard Dry Creek Valley Petillant Naturel Vermentino. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)

Joseph Jewell Wines 2021 Raymond Burr Vineyard Dry Creek Valley Petillant Naturel Vermentino ($49)

Adrian Jewell Manspeaker isn't afraid to explore, as evidenced by his efforts to produce high-quality pinot noir from Humboldt County, where he grew up (a story for another time). From his current Forestville base, Manspeaker makes still pinot noirs and zinfandels from noted vineyards including Bucher, Grist and Hallberg, yet it's his vermentinos — one bubbly, one not — that command attention. The 2021 Petillant Naturel ("pet nat") gets its carbonation from a single fermentation in the bottle, and while it foams like Mt. Vesuvius upon opening, in the glass it's a zingy, slighty yeasty, fun-to-drink sparkler with lemon-lime and pear character. Manspeaker also produced a 2021 still vermentino from Raymond Burr Vineyard ($27); it's fruity, fresh and ever so slightly sweet on the palate — a real crowd pleaser.

J Vineyards & Winery NV Cuvée 20 Russian River Valley ($38)

Long story short: Judy Jordan and her father, Tom, of Jordan Winery, founded J Wine Co. in 1986 for the express purpose of producing Champagne-style wines. Once she had total control, Judy achieved great success and eventually sold to E. & J. Gallo in 2015. Gallo, under winemaker Nicole Hitchcock, continues to offer stylish sparklers, among them Cuvée 20, bottled to celebrate the winery's 20th anniversary. It's become J's flagship wine, with vibrant green apple, pear and citrus fruit, energetic bubbles and toasty touches. The companion NV Russian River Valley Brut Rosé ($45) is a more red-fruit-forward wine, pleasing those who seek generous flavors in their flutes.

7 sauvignon blancs

Alma de Cattleya 2021 Sonoma County Sauvignon Blanc ($22)

Bibiana González Rave left her native Colombia to study winemaking in Bordeaux and produce wines across France, South Africa and California — including at Sonoma County's La Crema, Peay Vineyards and Lynmar Estate. In 2012, she launched her own company, Cattleya Wines. The Alma de Cattleya (cattleya is Colombia's national flower) label is an introduction to Rave's work and is more affordable than some similar-quality wines in the market. This sauvignon blanc is bright and crisp, with pleasant grassiness and grapefruit and Meyer lemon flavors. Also highly recommended: Alma de Cattleya rosé ($22), chardonnay ($26) and red-wine blend ($27). Splurgers should be impressed by Rave's Cattleya of small-production chardonnays and pinot noirs ($55-$85).

Baldassari Family Wines 2021 Knights Valley Sauvignon Blanc ($28)

Dom Michel and his winemaker son, Matt Michel, produce just 1,200 cases or so of wine each vintage, and they've been doing so since 2006. At their tasting room in Windsor, visitors can sample their small-lot wines from a variety of regions, among them Alexander Valley (malbec),

Bennett Valley (syrah) and Russian River Valley (chardonnay and pinot noir). The sauvignon blanc, from Knights Valley, stands out for its lively grapefruit, tropical aromas and flavors and pleasant herbal notes — common for the varietal — along with a textural depth that comes from Matt fermenting the juice in 8-year-old oak barrels (no new oak to mute the freshness).



Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat

Dry Creek Vineyard 2021 DCV3 Sauvignon Blanc Dry Creek Valley. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)

Dry Creek Vineyard 2021 DCV3 Sauvignon Blanc Dry Creek Valley ($30)

Of the four sauvignon blancs the winery produces in a given vintage, DCV3 is the most expressive and impressive, with layers of grapefruit, lime cordial, passionfruit, green melon and fresh-cut grass and a bracing, mouthwatering finish. For a great introduction to the Dry Creek Vineyard

sauvignon blanc style, try the 2021 Sonoma County Fumé Blanc ($16); it's widely available. The winery bottles several other varietals and blends, with the zinfandels — particularly the 2019 Old Vine Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel ($40) — standing out.

Dutton Estate Winery 2021 Kylie's Cuvée Russian River Valley Sauvignon Blanc ($28)

Joe and Tracy Dutton named this wine for their middle daughter, Kylie. Joe and his brother, Steve, farm 1,400 acres of wine grapes in the Russian River Valley and Sonoma Coast AVAs, and Joe plucked sauvignon blanc from what the family calls their Shop Block and Mrs. George's vineyards. Winemaker Bobby Donnell turned the fruit into a lively palate of nectarine, pineapple and guava goodness, with palate-whisking acidity. Kyndall's Reserve Dutton Ranach Chardonnay from 2020 ($45) and the very young 2021 Karmen Isabella Dutton Ranch Pinot Noir ($49) are also worth seeking out.

Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat

J. Cage Cellars 2021 Tzabaco Rancho Vineyard Dry Creek Valley Sauvignon Blanc. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)

J. Cage Cellars 2021 Tzabaco Rancho Vineyard Dry Creek Valley Sauvignon Blanc ($30)

Roger and Donna Beery of J. Cage came to Sonoma County, from Texas by way of Colorado, to produce pinot noir. They're passionate about the grape, and their bottlings, from purchased grapes, are excellent. Yet this sauvignon blanc cannot be ignored; it's near-perfect, with floral aromas, juicy citrus, honeydew melon and white peach flavors wrapped in mouthwatering acidity. Aged in a mix of neutral barrels and stainless steel, it showcases the grapes grown in Janice and Brian Schmidts' vineyard (which their family has farmed since 1856), adding ideal weight while preserving vibrancy. Adam Lee consults on winemaking with the Beerys' son, Conch, helping the family also produce delicious pinots — my favorite being the El Coro Vineyard Sonoma Coast ($52) from Keller Estate in the Petaluma Gap.

Matanzas Creek Winery 2021 Sonoma County Sauvignon Blanc ($24)

This Bennett Valley winery, owned by Jackson Family Wines since 2000, remains the land of lovely lavender fields and sauvignon blanc. As many as five sauvignons are bottled under this brand in most vintages, from grapes grown in Jackson Family Wines' extensive vineyard holdings in Alexander Valley, Knights Valley and Bennett Valley. The Sonoma County wine is blended from multiple vineyards to achieve year-to-year consistency, with racy white grapefruit, lemon-lime, kiwi fruit and fresh-herb personality. Savvy shoppers can find it for less than its $24 suggested retail price.

Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat

Reynoso Family Vineyards 2021 Alexander Valley Sauvignon Blanc. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)

Reynoso Family Vineyards 2021 Alexander Valley Sauvignon Blanc ($25)

Joe and Elena Reynoso farm more than 550 acres in Alexander Valley and have two brands: Crescere, for ultra-high-end sauvignon blanc, chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon; and the Reynoso Family label, with very approachable, good-value wines, including this one. Fresh, floral and with textbook varietal character of lemon-lime, stone fruit and green melon, it's snappy, with tingling acidity. For a burst of fresh berry and plum fruit, supple tannins and an attractive price, also look for the 2019 Reynoso Family Vineyards Alexander Valley Red Wine ($30). Like the sauvignon blanc, it can often be found at chain stores for less. Both wines are made for the Reynosos by consultant Drew Damskey.

15 chardonnays

Benovia Winery 2020 Martaella Estate Russian River Valley Chardonnay ($65)

Martaella is the estate vineyard surrounding the Benovia winery in the heart of Russian River Valley. Proprietors Mary Dewane and Joe Anderson, along with winemaker and co-owner Mike Sullivan, have several Russian River Valley blends and single-vineyard bottlings of chardonnay and pinot noir in their repertoire, and Martaella — a blend of the names Martha and Eleanor, Mary's and Joe's mothers — is closest to their hearts. This chardonnay, in its third year of production, has everything one could want: full body, vibrant citrus, apple and white peach fruit, spicy oak and a lingering finish.

Chalk Hill Estate Winery 2021 Sonoma Coast Chardonnay ($26)

It's encouraging to see wineries known for expensive bottlings find ways to produce good wines for the rest of us, too, wines that don't cost more than what we spend on groceries. Chalk Hill has figured it out, at least with this impeccably made chardonnay and a companion Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir ($29). The chardonnay is crisp and structured — no flab on the bones — with gentle vanilla and oak spice accenting the yellow stone fruit, pear and green apple flavors. There has been some price creep over the last few vintages; fingers crossed that Chalk Hill hits the brakes. At its highest end are the Founder's Block Chalk Hill Chardonnay ($100) and 2018 Chalk Hill Estate Red ($100); they're full-bodied, rich and hedonistic, and there is certainly a thirst for these wines.

Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat

Chenoweth Wines 2019 Bootlegger's Hill Green Valley of Russian River Valley Hill Chardonnay. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)

Chenoweth Wines 2019 Bootlegger's Hill Green Valley of Russian River Valley Hill Chardonnay ($45)

Like many vineyard owners, Amy and Charlie Chenoweth branched out to make their own wines. They produce mostly chardonnay and pinot noir from their home ranch in the Sebastopol Hills and two other vineyards, Bootlegger's Hill and Treehouse. She's the winemaker, he's the grower and together they produce small amounts of highly sought-after wines and sell most of their grapes. This chardonnay comes from Bootlegger's, and it's a balanced beauty, as crisp and tangy as a Granny Smith apple, with hints of Meyer lemon, toast, baking spice and vanilla. The 2018 Green Valley of Russian River Valley Pinot Noir ($75) is mostly a blend of the three-estate vineyard and shows a cool-climate character in its riveting red fruit (cranberry, tart cherry, plum) and taut tannins.

Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat

CHEV 2019 Russian River Valley Chardonnay. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)

CHEV 2019 Russian River Valley Chardonnay ($80)

Michael Browne, who founded the enormously successful Kosta Browne brand with Dan Kosta, has kept himself busy since the two sold Kosta Browne in 2017. First Browne launched the CIRQ brand for high-end pinot noir and chardonnay, then he added CHEV in a similar vein. He's a pinot master, yet his chardonnays are blockbusters, too. The 2019 CHEV is a rich, concentrated, multilayered marvel that floods the mouth with ripe stone fruit and citrus, caramel and toasted brioche. It's borderline over-the-top and unctuous, yet the bracing acidity keeps it fresh-tasting and surprisingly balanced.

Domaine de la Riviere 2019 Flora Marie Vineyard Russian River Valley Chardonnay ($70)

Marla and Geoff Bedrosian moved from the East Coast to Windsor after buying a vineyard and house on Starr Road. Their first harvest was 2017, and today their winemaker, Kale Anderson, produces chardonnay, rosé and pinot noir from the estate vineyard and purchased grapes from nearby sites. Flora Marie is one of them, off Eastside Road south of Healdsburg and "mother" to this, ahem, floral chardonnay that boasts spiced apple, peach and citrus flavors, gentle oak influence and crackling acidity. Also consider the 2019 Middle Reach Vineyards Pinot Noir ($75), a blend of grapes from vineyards including El Diablo, Starr Ridge and Vineyard eleven.

Fort Ross Vineyard & Winery 2019 Mother of Pearl Fort Ross-Seaview Chardonnay ($64)

Winemaker Jeff Pisoni combines wine lots from blocks in Linda and Lester Schwartzes' Fort Ross Vineyard to create this focused, scintillating chardonnay. The vineyard is sited in the chilly Fort Ross-Seaview AVA, just 3 miles from the ocean, so it's nearly impossible for grapes to get too ripe here. The marine influence locks in their refreshing natural acidity. Pisoni's measured use of French oak fermentation vessels preserves the acidity in the wines and, in the case of this chardonnay, adds toasted hazelnut and caramel notes to the yellow stone fruit and citrus aromas and flavors. On the pinot noir side, the 2018 Top of Land Fort Ross-Seaview Pinot Noir ($80) is brisk and medium-bodied, with red raspberry, black plum fruit and hints of juniper, Christmas spices and forest floor.

Gary Farrell Vineyards & Winery 2019 Ritchie Vineyard Russian River Valley Chardonnay ($65)

There is a waiting list of winemakers eager to get their hands on chardonnay grapes from Kent Ritchie's vineyard at the intersection of Eastside and Trenton-Healdsburg roads southwest of Healdsburg. Planted in 1972, it's proved to be a magical spot, where Goldridge sandy loam and volcanic ash soils combine with the sought-after Old Wente clone to produce exceptional wines. Gary Farrell winemaker Theresa Heredia is among the fortunate, producing a wine from Ritchie's vineyard with tension, zero fat and hints of flint, baked brioche, Meyer lemon and hazelnut. Of similar character are single-vineyard chardonnays from Olivet Lane and Westside Farms.

Lynmar Estate Winery 2018 Quail Hill Vineyard Russian River Valley Chardonnay ($63)

Like a handful of wineries among those on our "Amazing" list, Lynmar could have placed several wines, based on high quality across all its chardonnays and pinot noirs. I have a personal connection with the Quail Hill Chardonnay, made by Pete Soergel from a hilly block of vines on the home property in Sebastopol. I was a grape brix sampler for Merry Edwards before she started her eponymous winery nearby and spent several hours during the course of the 1990 growing season on Quail Hill, randomly plucking berries from the vines, crushing them in a baggie and checking their juice sugar levels with a refractometer, as they matured toward harvest. It was one of the most striking vineyards on my sampling route of 35 or so sites, though I couldn't spend quality time there until I visited as a journalist. I have since sipped the florally aromatic, mouth-filling, energetic Quail Hill Chardonnay on several occasions and marveled, "How in the heck did I climb up that hill back then?"

Marine Layer Wines 2019 Aries Sonoma Coast Chardonnay ($40)

After selling the Banshee Wines brand to Foley Family Wines, Baron Ziegler and winemaker Rob Fischer created Marine Layer, tipping a cap to the famous fog that creeps inland from the Pacific Ocean and creates a cool growing climate for growing chardonnay and pinot noir along the Sonoma Coast. For Aries, Fischer blended wine lots from the Heintz, Durell, Gap's Crown and Bohemian vineyards, resulting in a sleek, tightly wound, citrus-driven chardonnay that is remarkably fresh from start to finish.

Pellegrini Wine Co. 2018 Olivet Lane Vineyard Russian River Valley Chardonnay ($50)

A fourth generation member of the Pellegrini family, Alexia, manages the property on West Olivet Road in western Santa Rosa. It was planted some 40 years ago to chardonnay, and pinot noir has become the focus variety over time. Yet this wine represents textbook Russian River Valley chardonnay, with luscious green apple, pear, lemon and tropical fruit, medium-full body, spicy oak notes and mouthwatering acidity. The 2018 Olivet Lane Pinot Noir ($65) is elegant and lithe, with pretty red fruit. There's also a terrific 2019 Alexander Valley Zinfandel ($35) under the Pellegrini label.

Sangiacomo Family Wines 2020 Sangiocomo Vineyrds Sonoma Coast Chardonnay ($58)

The Sangiacomos have farmed wine grapes in Carneros and the Sonoma Coast since 1969. Only in 2016 did they begin to produce their own commercial wine, with James MacPhail. There are single-vineyard and single-block Sangiacomo wines, though this blend strikes a perfect balance, with fruit from Carneros and the Petaluma Gap melding beautifully: richness from the warmer Green Acres Vineyard in Carneros and steely structure from the cool, wind-whipped Roberts Road Vineyard in the Petaluma Gap (labeled as Sonoma Coast). The 2021 Sangiacomo Vineyards Sonoma Coast Vin Gris of Pinot Noir ($30) is also a knockout, refreshing, with juicy raspberry and strawberry flavors and a hit of citrus.

Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat

Small Vines 2017 TBH Vineyard Sonoma Coast Chardonnay. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)

Small Vines 2017 TBH Vineyard Sonoma Coast Chardonnay ($72)

TBH stands for The Barlow Homestead, where Paul and Kathryn Sloan live and grow chardonnay and pinot noir on a windy, cool ridge near Sebastopol. The vines are organically farmed by Paul, who studied vineyards in Burgundy, France, and determined that high-density planting and organic methods produced superior grape and therefore, superior wines. Yields are low — a financial drawback — yet the close spacing makes for intense fruit and shields the clusters from damaging sunlight in summer through fall. Paul operated his own vineyard management company

and made Small Vines' first commercial wine in 2005. The portfolio includes 2018 Sonoma Coast Chardonnay ($55), 2018 Russian River Valley Estate Cuvee Pinot Noir ($65) and 2017 TBH Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir ($89). All are wines of finesse and vibrancy.

Stonestreet Estate Vineyards 2018 Alexander Valley Chardonnay ($45)

Stonestreet, a brand relative in the Jackson Family Wines fold, produces prodigious, ageworthy $100 chardonnays and cabernet sauvignons from 5,500-acre Alexander Mountain Estate. Smartly, Stonestreet also makes outstanding wines at more affordable prices, blends of various wine lots from the estate, like this chardonnay. You can pay more and get less, as this wine strikes a balance of richness with vibrancy, with grilled pineapple, peach and baked apple decadence supported by citrus notes, oak spice and palate-cleansing acidity.

Suara Wine Co. 2020 Seapig Sonoma Coast Chardonnay ($32)

Drew Damskey, a rapidly rising consulting winemaker for several Sonoma County brands and partner in his family's Palmeri Wines, also has a stake in Seapig, with Sebastian Lane. The story goes that Nordic explorers called the animals they saw on their ocean journeys "seapigs," which were most likely walruses. In actuality, a sea pig is an ocean-floor-dwelling sea cucumber that searches for dead things to eat. Even though the creature on the label sure looks like a sea cuke, let's go with the Norse legend, because this chardonnay is crisp and elegant — dare I say Chablis-like? — with great tension and minerality, the polar opposite of muddy.

Three Sticks Wines 2020 Gap's Crown Vineyard Petaluma Gap Chardonnay ($60)

Three Sticks proprietor Bill Price also owns Gap's Crown in the chilly, windy Petaluma Gap and sells grapes to other wineries. He keeps enough fruit for his winemaker, Ryan Pritchard, to produce this striking wine, one that sparked my "Oh my god, good" response on first taste. It's pure, precise, minerally and layered, and has a forever finish. When a wine is this cohesive and balanced, aroma and flavor descriptors seem unnecessary, but for those who insist, there's yellow stone fruit, Meyer lemon, marzipan, sea salt, barrel spice, etc., etc. Just drink it and savor the experience.

8 other white wines

Balletto Vineyards 2021 Russian River Valley Pinot Gris ($21)

By 1994, John and Terri Balletto had grown their Sebastopol land into the largest vegetable farm in Northern California, with 70 varieties rooted on 700 acres. They planted their first vineyard the following year and eventually sold their vegetable business, going all in on wine grapes. They sell most of their fruit to wineries, holding back some of the best for their own label, which now

totals approximately 25,000 annual cases of chardonnay, pinot noir, sauvignon, gewürztraminer, sparklers and this dry, Alsatian-style pinot gris. No lightweight, it's at once mouth-filling and focused, with a melange of pear, lime and tropical fruit personality. Although winemaker Anthony Beckman produces several solid single-vineyard chardonnays and pinot noirs, his "starter" Russian River Valley pinot, at $30, is highly recommended, too.

Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat

Belden Barns 2020 Sonoma Mountain Gruner Veltliner. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)

Belden Barns 2020 Sonoma Mountain Gruner Veltliner ($30)

In the early 2000s, gruner veltliner from Austria was a sommelier's best friend, a white wine compatible with many dishes, especially seafood, thanks to its lemon-lime, unripe pear and white pepper profile and zesty acidity. Gruner was hot, and then it was not, as somms abandoned "groaner" for the next new thing. Yet it's still an "it" grape for Nate and Lauren Belden, and they were the first to plant it in Sonoma County, on their Sonoma Mountain estate, Steiner Vineyard. Their version is fuller and riper than most gruners on the market today, yet still with vibrant acidity to support the honeyed golden apple, peach and lime flavors and fresh-herb accent. The Beldens' sauvignon blanc, blanc de noirs and pinot noirs are also stellar.

Dot Wine 2021 Roan Family Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir White Wine ($45)

"White" pinot noir has become a thing, though not like that white zinfandel thing of the past. Pressing the clear juice from red pinot noir grapes before the skin color begins to bleed out creates a so-called white wine; skin flavor and tannin don't play a part in the wine's makeup. Dot Wine proprietors Lise Asimont and Shawn Phillips ended up with a wine very much like a viognier, with honeysuckle and pear notes, slightly viscous texture and citrusy acidity; the aroma is hauntingly floral. Asimont is a longtime viticulturist and Santa Rosa Junior College adjunct professor. Phillips is a professional gardener and landscaper. They use regenerative and sustainable agriculture methods to produce wines with a heavy emphasis on Russian River Valley pinot noir — red, rosé and now white.

Dutton-Goldfield Winery 2021 Shop Block Green Valley of Russian River Valley Pinot Blanc ($33)

Long a fan of the chardonnays and pinot noirs from Steve Dutton and Dan Goldfield, I've also had a soft spot for their pinot blancs. The grape, most commonly grown and vinified in the Alsace region of France, Austria and Alto Adige in Italy, has a smattering of plantings in California, just

200-plus acres. I salute Dutton-Goldfield for perpetuating a variety that continues to decline in the state as it's being replaced by more lucrative chardonnay. Smelling and tasting of white peach, green pear and citrus, it's bright and medium-bodied and has a palate-whisking finish.

Emeritus Vineyards 2021 Hallberg Blanc Russian River Valley Pinot Noir Blanc ($42)

Here's another white wine made from red grapes. It's lemony and peachy in aroma and flavor and luscious without being heavy or soft. It has a mouthwatering finish that begs for another sip. Winemaker Dave Lattin removes the juice from the just-picked Hallberg Ranch pinot noir grapes, before their skins begin to release any red color, and ferments the juice in concrete tanks and neutral oak barrels. Aging in mostly older oak barrels rounds out any edges and enhances texture. Winery president Mari Jones' father, Brice Cutrer Jones, founded chardonnay specialist Sonoma-Cutrer Vineyards, sold it in 1999 and switched allegiances to pinot noir, with Emeritus Vineyards in Sebastopol. He retired, Mari took over and today Emeritus, in addition to Hallberg Blanc, produces red pinots from Hallberg Ranch in Russian River Valley and the Pinot Hill vineyard in the Sonoma Coast AVA.

Francis Ford Coppola Winery 2020 Francis Coppola Reserve Catie's Corner Russian River Valley Viognier ($40)

The movie director folded his Geyserville winery into Delicato Family Wines operations in 2021 and, for now, the wines and labels appear to be unchanged (except for vintages, of course), Rustic restaurant still serves Francis' favorite dishes, and the pool and park remain intact. The Reserve line of Francis Ford Coppola wines — there are a gazillion different, sometimes confusing, tiers — are dependably excellent, among them this viognier. Hailing from Catie's Corner Vineyard, it's viscous on entry and refreshingly brisk on the finish, with juicy peach, apricot and citrus aromas and flavors and a distinctive orange peel note throughout.

Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat

Palmeri Wines 2020 Monte Rosso Vineyard Sonoma County Old Vine Semillon. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)

Palmeri Wines 2020 Monte Rosso Vineyard Sonoma County Old Vine Semillon ($54)

There is very little semillon planted in Sonoma County, as it tends to produce rather bland wines here. What is grown and vinified is typically used as a blender to lend weight to sauvignon blanc. But Palmeri's Kerry and Daisy Damskey and their son, Drew, got their hands on old-vine semillon from Monte Rosso Vineyard in the Moon Mountain District of Sonoma Valley and came up with this stunning wine. Monte Rosso, first planted in 1886 and now owned by E. & J. Gallo, is known for its zinfandel and cabernet sauvignon, yet Palmeri semillon was the most

unexpectedly exciting wine I tasted in 2022. Despite being fermented in new French oak puncheons, it's not an oaky wine, but rather floral, minerally and crisp. Each sip delivers new flavors: Meyer lemon, Asian pear, clementine, nougat, candied ginger, beeswax — the complexity and balance are remarkable.

Selby Winery 2020 Rockpile Grenache Blanc ($28)

Susie Selby has been a fixture in Sonoma County winemaking since 1993, when she produced 150 cases of chardonnay in 1994. The Dallas native earned a master's degree in business from George Washington University, joined the corporate workforce and discovered wine through travels with her father, Dave. She did every job to elbow into the wine business, from sales and marketing to forklift driver to assistant winemaker at a Healdsburg winery while working on her own brand, which she started with her dad. Since then, Selby wines have been poured at the White House — including for President Barack Obama's 49th birthday — and Susie has produced wine from seemingly every grape variety known to Sonoma County. Selby has a way with chardonnay, though this grenache blanc stands out for being a medium-full-bodied white wine that isn't chardonnay. Mandarin orange, green apple, nectarine and baking spice tick the flavor boxes, with refreshment on the long finish.

8 rosés

Drive Wines 2021 Kobus Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir Rosé ($28)

John Musto and Tom Young began as garagistes, making wine in Young's garage, from grapes grown in his home vineyard. Before that, Musto worked in finance, studied at the Culinary Institute of America in New York and acquired a taste for wine when his parents opened bottles of old-vine zinfandel. After living in Italy for two years, he moved to Sonoma County in 2013, intent on making wine, and met Young, a graphic designer. After hobby winemaking in Young's garage, they went pro in the garage of vineyard owner and vintage car restorer Peter Lewis. This lovely rosé was fermented in stainless steel and aged in stainless steel and neutral French oak barrels. The result is a balanced, juicy and focused wine with strawberry/tangerine/blood orange essence. Also try their 2019 Sonoma Coast Canihan Vineyard Syrah ($36), which is smartly priced and has cool-climate elegance.

Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat

Kara Marie Wines 2021 The Ra Ra Dry Creek Valley Rosé of Grenache. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)

Kara Marie Wines 2021 The Ra Ra Dry Creek Valley Rosé of Grenache ($26)

Mentored by her father, former Geyser Peak Winery winemaker Daryl Groom, Kara Marie Groom launched her own brand in 2021, debuting with this charming, dry, red-berry-infused rosé and a 2021 riesling from Sonoma Mountain (also $26). She's riding the wave of young winemakers/brand owners committed to winning over new wine drinkers with bottlings that are delicious and offer a sense of fun and lack of pretension. Kara's mantra: "Here for a good time, not a long time." As in drink now, without overthinking.

Kobler Estate Winery 2021 Kobler Family Vineyards Rosé of Syrah Russian River Valley ($34)

In 1996, Michael Kobler, his brother Otto and their wives, Debbie and Barbara, established 4.5 acres of syrah — the northern Rhone Valley (France) foundation grape — in the chilliest part of Russian River Valley, Green Valley. At the time, syrah was widely planted throughout California, wine styles varied widely and retailers didn't know how to sell it. The Koblers followed their instincts and stuck with the variety. This rosé is a fine introduction to cool-climate syrah, with bracing acidity supporting vivid cherry, raspberry and plum fruitiness. The Kobler syrahs ($58-$95) typically are tight upon release and beg for cellaring — strong on savory, meaty character over forward fruitiness. Patience can reward those willing to cellar them five years or more.

Lasseter Family Winery 2021 Enjoué Sonoma Valley ($35)

A rosé that doesn't claim to be one on its label, Enjoué is an expression of Nancy and John Lasseters' appreciation for the pink wines of southern France. Enjoué is dry — not sweet — yet brims with luscious red berry, cherry and watermelon flavors. The Lasseters' Glen Ellen vineyard includes plantings of multiple Rhone Valley grape varieties, among them the components of Enjoué: grenache, mourvedre, syrah and counoise. The mix works wonderfully in this food-friendly, somewhat substantial rosé. Lasseter also offers a fleshy, tropically flavored 2020 Sonoma Valley sauvignon blanc-semillon blend, Voilà ($55).

Quivira Vineyards 2021 Wine Creek Ranch Dry Creek Valley Rosé ($25)

Pale salmon in color, winemaker Hugh Chappelle's rosé has an intriguing aroma/flavor mix of blood orange, wild strawberry, raspberry and white peach and a tangy, juicy finish. It's a near-perfect Sonoma County rosé, flavorful yet not too bold or heavy, and with mouthwatering acidity. Chappelle combined grenache (70%), counoise, mourvedre, petite sirah and primitivo into a cohesive blend. It was made with intention, with the fruit harvested and vinified specifically for rosé, not bleeding off juice from fermenting red grapes and turning the excess into rosé. Being in Dry Creek Valley, the Quivira estate also produces sauvignon blancs and zinfandels; the 2021 Fig Tree Vineyard Sauvignon Blanc ($30) and 2019 Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel ($28) are delicious, fairly priced and relatively easy to find.

Rodney Strong Vineyards 2021 Sonoma Coast Rosé of Pinot Noir ($25)

A producer of high-end rosés once indignantly asked me how a "grocery store" wine could win a gold medal in a notable competition. My answer was that in that blind tasting, the Rodney Strong wine shined far more brightly than others, without judges knowing the producer, price nor retail presence. It simply tasted more delicious. The 2021 RSV rosé fares similarly: impeccably balanced, dry and widely available — and sometimes discounted, based on volume purchases by stores. Senior vice president of winemaking and winegrowing, Justin Seidenfeld, and his team bottle high-quality wines across numerous price points; cabernet is a major focus and they produce several. I've long admired the Knights Valley Cabernet Sauvignon ($36) and Symmetry ($60), a Bordeaux-style red blend.

Sonoma-Cutrer Vineyards 2021 Rosé of Pinot Noir Russian River Valley ($25)

Aussie native Mick Schroeter directs winemaking for Sonoma-Cutrer, which was established by Brice Cutrer Jones in 1973, as a chardonnay specialist. After Jones sold to Brown-Forman in 1999, Sonoma-Cutrer branched out to embrace other grape varieties, chief among them pinot noir. This rosé was produced from that grape, and the red-fruit side of pinot shines through, accented by hints of blood orange and pink grapefruit. It's lip-smacking and energetic. While Schroeter and his team continue the Sonoma-Cutrer chardonnay tradition, pinot noir is where the excitement is, as evidenced by the 2018 Vine Hill Russian River Valley Pinot Noir ($50), a spicy, nicely balanced wine with firm structure and subtle oak shading.

The.Grenachista 2021 Sonoma Valley Grenache Rosé ($25)

As his brand name suggests, Casey Graybehl is a grenache fanatic. He turns the southern Rhone Valley workhorse grape into grenache noir (which is red, not black), pet-nats, piquettes and this dry rosé — plus grenache blanc, still another grape variety in the Rhone family. Graybehl is the production director for Obsidian Wine Co. in Sonoma County and uses his spare time to make grenache-driven wines for his own label. The 2021 rosé has scintillating briskness and vibrant raspberry and wild strawberry scents and flavors. Another Graybehl wine to try is the 2019 Mounts Vineyard Dry Creek Valley Grenache Noir ($38).

20 pinot noirs

A note on the 2020 vintage: Smoke from summer wildfires tainted red grapes in some Sonoma County vineyards in 2020, and thin-skinned pinot noir grapes were the most vulnerable. Depending on location, atmospheric height of the smoke, clearing winds and other factors, many growers and wineries dodged the smoke bullet. But others, particularly in the Russian River Valley and Sonoma Coast AVAs, didn't harvest damaged grapes or rejected them when they arrived at the

cellar. No smokiness or ashtray character was sensorially detected in tastings of the 2020 red wines recommended here. Prudent, trustworthy producers did not release wines suspected of being smoke-tainted, assuring consumers there is very little chance any of these bottlings aren't in healthy condition.

Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat

Blue Farm Wines 2020 Anne Katherina Vineyard Carneros Pinot Noir. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)

Blue Farm Wines 2020 Anne Katherina Vineyard Carneros Pinot Noir ($75)

Viticulturist Anne Moller-Racke has planted and managed vineyards throughout Sonoma County and spent several years expanding Donum Estate's Carneros winegrowing program. Blue Farm is her own Sonoma County pinot noir project, which includes vineyard- and block-designated wines and a scintillating Laceroni Russian River Valley Chardonnay ($75). The most delicious and accessible pinot, upon release, is the Anne Katherina from Moller-Racke's home vineyard. Multilayered and refined, it shows vibrant red and blackberry flavors, streamlined tannins and palate-refreshing natural acidity.

Convene 2019 Russian River Valley Pinot Noir ($62)

Dan Kosta left his Kosta Browne and AldenAlli wine brands to reinvent, once again, with Convene by Dan Kosta. With Shane Finley as winemaker (they've worked together for more than 15 years), Kosta and Convene are dedicated to blended wines, plus lesser amounts of vineyard-designates. Longtime relationships with North Coast growers give Kosta a leg up in finding outstanding-quality grapes without paying single-vineyard prices. Blending from multiple sources allows Finley to keep wine styles consistent and gives him more flexibility in the cellar. One of the first shots out of the Dan Kosta cannon is this Russian River pinot, and it's a bull's-eye: silky tannins, ripe cherry and red plum fruit, pomegranate notes and a pleasingly tart, lengthy finish.

Donum Estate TK 2019 Estate Carneros Pinot Noir ($100)

Over time, the 95-acre Donum vineyard in Carneros has been subdivided into specific blocks, in winemaker Dan Fishman's drive to determine how differing soil types, exposures and elevations impact how the wines taste and smell. Call it terroir exploration; it's led to the bottling of commercially sold wines that demonstrate Fishman's theories. These wines — among them East Slope, West Slope, Mikado Tree and Three Hills — are pricey and usually offered only to wine club members. For those not in the club, try the blended estate pinot noir; it's not inexpensive,

but it dismisses the notion some have that Carneros pinots are light-bodied and lack depth. The Donum is full-bodied and tightly structured, displaying black cherry and dark plum, with hints of mocha and graphite.

DuMOL 2020 MacIntyre Estate Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir ($79)

2020 was the 25th vintage for DuMOL, and the Windsor winery was fortunate to have avoided smoke issues in its multiple owned and grape-sourced vineyards. The MacIntyre smells and tastes of super-juicy boysenberry and blackberry, with notes of Luxardo cherry liqueur and pie spice. It's full-bodied and firm and should benefit from cellaring. There are as many chardonnays in the range as pinot noirs, and all of them are beautiful and in great demand. Plus there are three very distinctive departures: a Sonoma Coast chenin blanc, Montecillo Vineyard Moon Mountain District cabernet sauvignon and an estate mencia, a Spanish variety cross between pinot noir and syrah.

Ektimo 2019 Mount Eden Clone Russian River Valley Pinot Noir ($50)

Dominic Xie, born in 1962 in the wine country of Ningxie Province, China, and his daughter, April Xie, run this winery in Russian River Valley. They acquired the former Cahill Estate in 2012, renamed it Ektimo ("to appreciate" in Greek) and later brought in Aaron Piotter as winemaker. From a single clone, Piotter created a wine with tangy red-berry flavors and a generous, juicy finish.

Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat

Furthermore Wines 2018 Graton Ridge Russian River Valley Pinot Noir. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)

Furthermore Wines 2018 Graton Ridge Russian River Valley Pinot Noir ($55)

Graton Ridge is proprietors Bob Zeches' and Chad Richard's estate vineyard, and they also buy grapes for their mostly single-vineyard pinot noirs. A warm, toasty-oak aroma leads to succulent, vibrant red berry, pomegranate and rhubarb. The tannins are silky, the finish long and the balance perfect.

Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat

J. Bucher Wines 2020 Bucher Vineyard Russian River Valley Pommard Clone Pinot Noir. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)

J. Bucher Wines 2020 Bucher Vineyard Russian River Valley Pommard Clone Pinot Noir ($65)

There are dozens upon dozens of pinot noir clones growing in Russian River Valley, from cuttings of vines grafted onto different rootstocks. Pommard is one of the more recognized clones in the region, and it's one of the first brought to the U.S. from France. It's usually part of multi-clone blends, but Bucher winemaker Adam Lee made this bold and beautiful wine from only Pommard, grown on the estate vineyard. Voluptuously fruity and polished, it coats the palate with flavor, with crisp acidity providing a long, perky finish. Also excellent is the 2020 Russian River Valley Pinot Noir ($52) from multiple blocks on John and Diane Buchers' Westside Road property.

Joseph Phelps Winery 2019 Freestone Vineyards Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir ($70)

One requirement for inclusion in "100 Amazing Wines" is that grapes are grown and vinified in Sonoma County. Although Joseph Phelps Winery is in St. Helena (Napa Valley), this tremendous pinot noir qualifies because it's made at Phelps' winery in Freestone (originally named Freestone, the brand was folded into the Joseph Phelps family). Aromas of violets, salty licorice and wet fir lead to an elegant, supple palate of vibrant red cherry and wild blackberry. Seamless throughout, it ends with mouthwatering acidity.

Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat

Keller Estate 2019 El Coro Petaluma Gap Pinot Noir. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)

Keller Estate 2019 El Coro Petaluma Gap Pinot Noir ($64)

El Coro — "the chorus" — is a ridgetop pinot noir block at Keller Estate, east of Petaluma in the Petaluma Gap AVA. The gap is defined by the marine-powered winds that keep afternoons and evenings cool throughout the growing season, and Keller is situated to receive the full effect. This pinot is a perennial favorite for its energetic acidity, nuances of brown baking spice and black tea and tangy red and dark-plum flavors. Often overlooked — and it shouldn't be — is the Keller Rotie Red Wine ($62), a syrah-based blend co-fermented with viognier (a traditional northern Rhone Valley technique). Its ripe blackberry and black cherry fruit is seasoned with hints of pepper and a hint of smoked meat, all refreshed by pert acidity.

Kosta Browne 2019 Treehouse Russian River Valley Pinot Noir ($165)

Astronomical scores from "Wine Spectator" magazine and other critics launched Dan Kosta and Michael Browne into the stratosphere of pinot noir making. The wines — there were several once, most small lots from hallowed vineyards — were soft and juicy. Yet in the minds of other reviewers, they were too plush and lacked the tannin and acid structure to last very long in the bottle. But who could argue with success? Kosta and Browne sold the brand, it sold again and

now it's under the Duckhorn Wine Co. umbrella. The style has evolved over time, with wines gaining backbone and complexity. This pinot is proof: deeply aromatic with notes of sarsaparilla and spiced cherry and solid tannins and acidity.

Lombardi Wines 2019 Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir ($49)

Cabell Coursey makes the wines for Tony and Christine Lombardi, who in turn donate significant amounts of their pinot noirs and chardonnays, and time, to support the Hilinski's Hope Foundation. Their nephew and godson, Washington State quarterback Tyler Hilinski, inexplicably died of suicide in 2018, and the Lombardis helped create the foundation, which assists high school and university athletes with mental-health issues and educates parents and coaches on how to seek help for their kids. Purchases of this bright, dark-berry-filled pinot and other Lombardi wines indirectly assist in the mission.

Merry Edwards Winery 2020 Meredith Estate Russian River Valley Pinot Noir ($80)

This Sebastopol winery is known for its intense, powerful pinots, and Edwards' first owned vineyard, Meredith Estate, is the backbone for this style. There is a richness to this single-vineyard wine, with its well-ripened berry and dark cherry fruit and some vanilla on the midpalate, substantial tannins and full body. It's not a pre-dinner quaff but rather a serious companion to red meat and duck dishes at dinner. For a more relaxed vibe and sipping, try the 2020 Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir ($48) for its bright pomegranate, cranberry and dark cherry fruit. Winemaker Heidi von der Mehden blended wine lots from several vineyard lots.

MacRostie 2019 Thale's Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir ($58)

Sit on the patio of MacRostie's tasting room on Westside Road south of Healdsburg, sip wine and admire the view of the vineyard. It's relatively new and is named Thale's for winery founder Steve MacRostie's wife. As it's evolved, so has the quality of wines it produces. The 2019 vintage is textbook Russian River Valley Middle Reach, with ripe cherry and raspberry fruit, rounded tannins and a lingering, juicy finish. No cellaring required; it's ready to drink now and over the next three years.

Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat

Papapietro Perry 2019 Leras Family Vineyards Russian River Valley Pinot Noir. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)

Papapietro Perry 2019 Leras Family Vineyards Russian River Valley Pinot Noir ($66)

This Healdsburg winery typically produces five to six pinot noirs each year, priced $61 to $82. Owning no vineyards means the Papapietros and Perrys pay the going rate for grapes, which go a long way in setting bottle prices, and that's true for all wineries without their own fruit sources. A longtime relationship with third-generation grape grower Nick Leras allows winemakers Ben Papapietro and Dave Low to offer this wine every vintage (so far). It impresses with its striking Bing cherry, rhubarb and raspberry core. There are bolder, fruitier pinots in the Papapietro Perry portfolio, yet this one shines for its elegance and balance.

Perri Jaye Vineyards 2018 Russian River Valley Pinot Noir ($52)

Perri Haughwout and her husband, Carmen, bought a 2.5-acre vineyard in Russian River Valley 15 years ago. Carmen is in the managerial side of the wine business, so Perri launched her own brand in 2017 — "a passion project," she calls it — after working several harvests for Kosta Browne and Inman Family Wines. Although current production is a tiny 100 cases (2,500 bottles), this pinot is worth seeking out for its suave, velvety texture, ripe red fruits and subtle oak spice.

Ron Noble Wines 2020 Petaluma Gap Family Blend Pinot Noir ($48)

Petaluman Ron Noble has a roving eye for great vineyards in Sonoma and Napa counties, with winemaker Megan Baccitich his sidekick searcher. Sometimes "great" wines can be made from makers' backyards, and that's the case with Family Blend from the Petaluma Gap. The year 2019 was the first vintage of this great-value wine which, like the 2020 vintage, came from young vines on the Noble estate. It's medium-bodied and lighter than Noble's more expensive pinot noirs. An herbal edge and a toastiness add interest.

Senses 2019 Day One Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir ($135)

Max Theriot is a TV actor and current star of CBS's "Fire Country," a hauntingly realistic look at wildfire fighting as we know it in Northern California. Theriot also has a second career, wine production, via his partnership with lifelong pals Christopher Strieter and Myles Lawrence-Briggs. They grew up together in Occidental and watched as vineyard plantings crept into their chilly neck of the woods. In 2011, they founded Senses Wines, with Theriot's family's B.A. Theriot Vineyard the cornerstone of the fledgling business. Today they source several vineyard sites in the Sonoma Coast and Russian River Valley AVAs. Day One Pinot Noir is made from grapes grown at the former Hillcrest Vineyard, planted in 1974 and considered the first planted in the Freestone-Occidental region. Lawrence-Briggs' family has owned it since the 1980s, and it's since been renamed Day One. The 2019 Day One is pure, precise and pretty.

Tongue Dancer 2020 Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir ($55)

From ocean-influenced vineyards comes this James MacPhail cuvée, and it smells and tastes as you'd expect from grapes grown in chilly conditions. Black raspberry, cranberry, rhubarb, forest floor, cardamom and white tea ride a wave of refreshing acidity. It's seamless and seductive.

Trombetta Family Wines 2019 Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir ($50)

Winemaker Erica Stancliff and her parents, Rickey and Roger Stancliff, focus on pinot noir, chardonnay and a pinot rosé from their Forestville base. Erica Stancliff, who also is consulting winemaker for a handful of other brands, blended this Sonoma Coast wine into one offering deep purple fruit, a briary character, savory forest floor and crunchy acidity.

VML 2019 Cresta Ridge Green Valley of Russian River Valley Pinot Noir ($67)

This was the Best of Class pinot noir at the 2022 Press Democrat North Coast Wine Challenge and deservedly so. It's delicious for its plump, mouthwatering red and blackberry fruit; touches of cherry cola and oak; supple, integrated tannins; and cracking acidity.

5 other reds

Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat

Acorn Winery/ Alegría Vineyards 2018 Medley Russian River Valley. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)

Acorn Winery/ Alegría Vineyards 2018 Medley Russian River Valley ($50)

Bill and Betsy Nachbaur are so low-key that if they ever toot horns, they do it so softly that few wine buffs realize they grow more than 100 grape types on their 32-acre Certified Historic Vineyard in eastern Russian River Valley. They produce only about 2,000 cases of wine each year. The primary varieties, first planted in 1890, are zinfandel, alicante bouschet and petite sirah, along with carignane, trousseau, sangiovese, petit bouschet, negrette, syrah, plavac mali, tannat, muscat noir and others. Medley is a field blend of up to 60 varieties; the 2018 vintage includes syrah, zinfandel, cinsaut, dolcetto, cabernet franc and viognier. It's a whole vineyard in a bottle, and it's delicious. Very juicy and reminiscent of blackberry pie a la mode, plum jam and cherry cola, Medley is fascinating to drink and a marvel of winemaking. Bill Nachbaur basically assembles a "blend of field blends," with grapes harvested in three stages based on when they ripen and fermented together before they go into barrel for 10 months or so. Then he creates a final blend from the field blends, and Medley goes back into barrels for another nine months. Whew.

Bedrock Wine Co. 2020 The Bedrock Heritage Sonoma Valley ($50)

After leaving Ravenswood Winery following its 2001 sale to Constellation Brands, Joel Peterson refired his old-vine-seeker engine and purchased a Sonoma Valley vineyard planted in 1888. It had gone by several names over the decades, so Peterson called it Bedrock Vineyard. His son, Morgan Twain-Peterson, who grew up working in the Ravenwood cellar, buys grapes from his father for his own Bedrock Wine Co. The vineyard is planted to zinfandel, carignane, mataro and a couple dozen other varieties, and several show up in this Heritage red blend. It's youthful and muscular now, with tight tannins that should relax with a few years of cellaring. Under all its sinew lie vibrant dark berries and spice, with a prominent crack of black pepper and coriander.

Mengler Family Wines 2019 Alegría Vineyards Russian River Valley Sangiovese ($45)

The Nachbaurs of Acorn Winery/Alegría Vineyards also sell zinfandel, syrah and sangiovese grapes to their neighbors, among them Chris and Rita Mengler. The Menglers are relatively new to the Sonoma County winemaking scene, having established their business in 2014. Viognier, chardonnay, rosé of syrah and dolcetto are in their lineup, though sangiovese is arguably the headliner. The fruit comes from Alegría, in which 26 clones of sangiovese are rooted. I tasted this wine at The Press Democrat's North Coast Wine Challenge this year (where it advanced to the sweepstakes round), and my notes were virtually the same as when I tasted it earlier, when my judging panel gave it a Double Gold medal: Weightier than Italian sangiovese but not too heavy … juicy, generous dark fruit … toasty oak and pleasant earthiness … firm tannins … great acid on the long finish. It amazed me last year, too.

Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat

Saini Vineyards 2019 Angelo's Paint Brush Dry Creek Valley. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)

Saini Vineyards 2019 Angelo's Paint Brush Dry Creek Valley ($40)

Carignane, sangiovese and grenache marry nicely in this blend, made by Julia Iantosca (Lambert Bridge, Lasseter) for the Saini family. Juicy red fruits and savory spice are framed by toasty, vanillin oak and supple tannins. It's way too easy to drink. Michele Saini immigrated to San Francisco in 1908 from Genoa, Italy, and purchased a ranch in Dry Creek Valley in 1917 with brother-in-law John Cuneo. They grew apples, pears and prunes, then diversified with wine grapes and sold their vinous crops to area wineries. It took fourth-generation farmer Mike Saini — Angelo's dad — and Mike's friend George Christie to take winemaking seriously, and they launched Saini Vineyards in 2008. Mike still farms. His wife, Laura, is the general manager, and their daughter, Valentina, has a rosé named for her. Iantosca's grenache ($45), sangiovese ($45) and Trailer Block Carignane ($50) are also noteworthy.

Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat

San Lorenzo Winery 2020 The Pearl Alexander Valley Red Field Blend. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)

San Lorenzo Winery 2020 The Pearl Alexander Valley Red Field Blend ($75)

After the Seghesios sold their namesake Healdsburg winery and 300 acres of vineyards in 2011, CEO Pete Seghesio maintained ownership of the San Lorenzo Vineyard (which spans the Alexander and Russian River valleys), believed to have first been planted in 1892. At what they call San Lorenzo Planting, Pete and his wife, Cathy, reside and raise cattle and chickens. They host a large vegetable garden for SingleThread restaurant, grow grapes and produce wine for their Journeyman label and San Lorenzo. They also own Journeyman Meat Co. The Pearl is an old-vine field blend of zinfandel, petite sirah, carignane, grand noir, alicante, negrette and mataro. Full-bodied and intense, it boasts bold black fruit and meat-friendly tannins, with crisp acidity locking in freshness on the palate.

8 zinfandels

Carlisle Winery & Vineyards 2020 Mancini Ranch Russian River Valley Zinfandel ($54)

Mike Officer, a founding member of the Historic Vineyard Society, wants to save as many old-vine plantings as possible. He's making zinfandels and field blends from the vineyards still pumping out fruit, including Mancini. Planted in 1922 (right after the start of Prohibition!) at the corner of Piner and Olivet roads outside Santa Rosa, Mancini has carignane, abouriou, valdiguié, alicante bouschet, grand noir and petite sirah planted within the zinfandel blocks. For decades, this vineyard slowly declined, with little effort made to replace missing or diseased vines. But new owner Max Reichwage is restoring Mancini to its former glory, improving soil and vine health. This zinfandel offers a mouthful of raspberry and dark cherry, plumped by vigorous acidity. The Carlisle name comes from the maiden name of Officer's wife, Kendall. They also own the Carlisle Vineyard — formerly Pelletti — also in Russian River Valley. Forty varieties have been recorded in the vineyard, all going into the Carlisle Vineyard Zinfandel ($54).

Dutcher Crossing Winery 2018 Pritchett Peaks Vineyard Rockpile Zinfandel ($52)

Debra Mathy bought this winery and 35 acres in 2007. The previous owners produced five wines, with founding winemaker Kerry Damskey. Fifteen years later, Mathy has grown the business to more than 30 wines, many made from grapes bought from outstanding sites throughout Sonoma, Napa and Mendocino counties. Chardonnay, sauvignon blanc, riesling, pinot noir, carignane, cabernet sauvignon, bubblies — and zinfandel. Established by the Mauritson family, Pritchett

Peaks Vineyard is an immaculately farmed site in the rock-strewn Rockpile AVA, providing Dutcher Crossing winemaker Nick Briggs with the fruit to produce a wine with briary red and black fruit, loads of pepper and brown baking spice and suave, supple tannins.

Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat

Limerick Lane Cellars 2019 "1910" Block Zinfandel Russian River Valley. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)

Limerick Lane Cellars 2019 "1910" Block Zinfandel Russian River Valley ($68)

For owners Jack and Alexis Bilbro, there is no better place to grow zinfandel in Sonoma County than eastern Russian River Valley. It's warm enough to ripen sun-seeking zin grapes, yet in the path of cooling fog that slows the ripening period and helps preserve the natural acidity that allows zin to have zing. The Limerick Lane estate was planted by the Del Fava family in 1910, and the 5 remaining acres of the original "mixed blacks" plantings are the base for this wine. In addition to zinfandel, the varieties include peloursin, negrette, alicante bouschet, syrah and petite sirah; they're harvested and co-fermented at the same time to become a wine that can't be produced anywhere else. From its inviting floral aromas to its dark cherry/strawberry compote core to the supple texture and balancing acidity, it's a distinctive sip of history.

Muscardini Cellars 2019 Los Chamizal Vineyards Moon Mountain District Sonoma Valley Zinfandel ($52)

Hedonism alert: This Best of Class zin at the 2022 Press Democrat North Coast Wine Challenge came from mountain-grown fruit, making it even more intense and structured than most. Still, it wears its weight well, thanks to its bright fruit (black raspberry, black currant and blueberry), lively acidity and caressing tannins. Marvelously complex, its descriptors include black pepper, mocha, anise, molasses, black fig and fresh sage.

Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat

Nalle Winery 2020 Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)

Nalle Winery 2020 Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel ($45)

Trends in zinfandel styles change every decade or so. One day, elegant, claret-like wines are popular; the next, 16.5% alcohol fruit bombs. The swings in popularity are often reactions to what wineries think will win over influential critics. Doug and Lee Nalle have never played that game. Since 1984, they've produced zinfandels of supreme balance and poise — wines they want to drink, scores be damned (though they'll take 'em). Usually under 14% alcohol, their zins are pretty, not powerful. They capture the racy, brambly raspberry and red cherry flavors and exotic

spice character of the grape, with nary a raisiny taste nor palate heat. The Nalles' son, winemaker Andrew, and his viticulturist wife, April, are in lockstep with the style, which continues with a wine I tried for the first time this fall: the 2020 Estate Ranch Red ($45), a seamless blend of 60% zinfandel and 40% cabernet sauvignon.

Ridge Vineyards 2020 Pagani Ranch Sonoma Valley Zinfandel ($42)

Ridge's Lytton Springs and Geyserville bottlings are critical favorites in the Sonoma County-grown zinfandel world, and they're widely distributed. Yet since 1991, Ridge has looked to Sonoma Valley for its Pagani Ranch zinfandel, and the 2020 vintage is superb. Ninety percent zinfandel with splashes of petite sirah and alicante bouschet, it shows the age of the vines (120 years) in the intensely exotic wild berry fruit, cherry compote, red plum and peppery profile. It has lively acidity, too. All this comes at a surprisingly low (for zinfandel) 13.8% alcohol level. Ridge uses petite sirah liberally in its zin-centric wines, as it's often naturally present in old-vine field blends. For a change of pace, try the 2019 Lytton Estate Dry Creek Valley Petite Sirah ($42) — plummy, muscular and chocolate-y.

St. Anne's Crossing 2019 Bar None Sonoma Valley Zinfandel ($50)

Ken and Diane Wilsons' Kenwood winery is, like most of their other Sonoma County wineries, zinfandel-obsessed, and with a Sonoma Valley bent. Most of their zins are small-volume and geared for onsite tastings and sales, so a winery visit, online order or wine club membership is the best way to acquire this gorgeous wine. It has admirable purity of red and blue fruits and great balance and is integrated from start to finish. Delicious says it all.

Wilson of Dry Creek 2019 Treborce Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel ($42)

Ken and Diane Wilsons' winery portfolio started with this winery and nearby Mazzocco Vineyards and grew to more than 10 Sonoma County brands, most with zinfandel. Among the dozens of vineyards they source for zin is Bob Littell's Treborce Vineyard on the benchlands of eastern Dry Creek Valley. It was planted in 1999 with budwood taken from four century-old vineyards and grafted onto phylloxera-resistant St. George rootstock. This preserved the old-timers' character before the vines would be ripped out when they stopped producing viable crops. This is a big wine with intense blackberry fruit and toasty vanillin oak, notes of brown sugar, cola and licorice and a lush, velvety finish.

16 Bordeaux-style red varietals & blends

Aldina Vineyards 2018 Fountaingrove Cabernet Sauvignon ($72)

Al and Dina Lopez lost their home in the 2017 Tubbs Fire, though the vineyard surrounding the hilltop house largely survived. The Lopezes and their adult children, Monica and Francisco Lopez, not only continued to produce this cabernet sauvignon after the fire, they also opened Bacchus Landing in 2021, a multi-winery tasting room and event center in Healdsburg. Aldina cabs are typically tight and somewhat tannic on release and open up with another year or two in the bottle. However, the 2018 vintage is more generous, with midpalate lushness and hints of chocolate and toast. The 2021 Los Carneros Sonoma Chardonnay ($38) is sleek and pure, meant for those who enjoy high-acid, minerally, low-oak-impact chardonnays.

Annadel Estate Winery 2019 Sonoma Valley Merlot ($72)

Drew Damskey is beyond the point of being considered a rising star winemaker. He's well-established, with his family's Palmeri brand and as a consulting winemaker for a handful of wineries including Annadel Estate. He captured merlot at its juiciest, jolt-of-energy best here. The wine is generous, with mouth-filling black cherry and red plum flavor. It's solidly structured and has a lingering, fresh finish. Hints of semisweet chocolate and toast add interest.

Aperture Cellars 2019 Alexander Valley Cabernet Sauvignon ($75)

Jesse Katz has done a lot of winemaking in his short 38 years, for such world-renowned wineries as Petrus in Bordeaux, Screaming Eagle in Napa Valley, Viña Cobos in Argentina and Lancaster Estate and its sister label, Roth, in Sonoma County. He went on to found his own labels, Devil Proof for malbec and Aperture Cellars for cabernet sauvignon. The malbecs are difficult to find unless you're on the mailing list. But Aperture cabs are more readily available, particularly this flagship Alexander Valley bottling, which is polished and incredibly balanced. Single-vineyard and block-designated cabernets are made in small amounts and come at higher prices ($150). The 2020 Aperture Bordeaux Red Blend ($60) was recently released and is only one tick behind the Alexander Valley cabernet sauvignon in terms of character.

Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat

Armida Winery 2019 Block 8 Stuhlmuller Vineyard Alexander Valley Cabernet Sauvignon. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)

Armida Winery 2019 Block 8 Stuhlmuller Vineyard Alexander Valley Cabernet Sauvignon ($75)

Winemaker Brandon Lapides produces just one cabernet sauvignon at his Dry Creek Valley winery and looks to Alexander Valley for it. There is a pleasing, savory cedar and dried herb complexity to this wine — an Alexander Valley signature — and juicy black cherry and berry. Despite its tender age, it's silky, polished and ready to drink now, or in 10 years.

Bricoleur Vineyards 2019 Kick Ranch Vineyard Fountaingrove Special Selection Cabernet Sauvignon ($85)

The Hanson family's tasting and event center on Starr Road in Windsor, in the Russian River Valley, calls for the production of chardonnay and pinot noir, and they produce these varietals. Yet this Fountaingrove cabernet sauvignon, from the Hansons' Kick Ranch Vineyard, will knock off your socks and put them back in the drawer. The Fountaingrove AVA doesn't get the credit it deserves for producing fine cabernet, even though individual wineries within the region, such as Pride Mountain, Cornell and Fisher Vineyards, are on most wine lovers' radars. Bricoleur's 2019 cab — its first vintage of the varietal — strikes a keen balance of richness and tannic structure, so savor it now or cellar it for five years. Cassis, black cherry, pipe tobacco, silky texture and a beam of bright acidity make for a complete and compelling wine.

Ehret Family Winery 2018 Knights Valley Cabernet Sauvignon ($75)

Those flying down Highway 128 through Knights Valley might glimpse the modest sign for Bavarian Lion Vineyards. What they don't see is a 1,800-acre estate, with 500 acres of grapevines, belonging to German-born motorsports driver Pierre Ehret, his wife, Susan, and their children. After first selling their Bordeaux-variety grapes to others, the Ehrets launched their brand in 2005, with veteran Erin Green (Pahlmeyer, Colgin, Bryant Family) as consulting winemaker. The red wines are powerful and concentrated, illustrated by this one. There's also a Hillside Reserve ($120), though the "regular" Knights Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (with 13% cabernet franc and 3% petit verdot) is more accessible now, with slightly dusty tannins, prominent toasted French oak and vanilla and loads of dark cherry and black currant fruit.

Flambeaux Wine 2018 Flambeaux Estate Vineyard Dry Creek Valley Cabernet Sauvignon ($70)

The Murray family, based in New Orleans, found wine-growing bliss in Dry Creek Valley and bought an existing vineyard planted to cabernet sauvignon and zinfandel. In a Sonoma County world of dense dark-fruit cabs, this one shines for its red-fruit profile (raspberry, red currant and a hint of cranberry), spice, background vanillin oak and liveliness on the palate. Also excellent are the 2018 Alexander Valley Cabernet Sauvignon ($75) and 2019 Sangiacomo Vineyard Sonoma Coast Chardonnay ($50).

Imagery Estate 2019 Sonoma County Cabernet Franc ($49)

This Best of Class winner in the 2022 Press Democrat North Coast Wine Challenge bursts with energy, with vivid raspberry and boysenberry aromas and flavors and fine balance. Jamie Benziger, following in the footsteps of her winemaker father, Joe Benziger, produces a dazzling array of

wines from both conventional and unusual varieties for Sonoma County. Her 2019 Upper Ridge Malbec ($45) from the Pine Mountain-Cloverdale Peak AVA is another solid choice.

Hamel Family Wines 2019 Isthmus Sonoma Valley ($90)

Hamel's red-wine blends certainly are expensive for Sonoma County, although similar stylish, concentrated and luscious Napa Valley versions can cost much more than the $120 price of the Hamel Family Ranch and Hamel Nuns Canyon red wines. Isthmus, a blend of cabernet sauvignon, merlot, cabernet franc and petite verdot, is an introduction to the Hamel style, at $30 less, and it delivers plush texture; well-ripened black currant, raspberry and dark cherry fruit; tobacco and sage notes; and a soft, long finish.

Jordan Winery 2018 Alexander Valley Cabernet Sauvignon ($60)

Happy 50th anniversary to John Jordan's Alexander Valley winery, established by his parents, Tom and Sally Jordan, in 1972. Founding winemaker Rob Davis retired in 2019, leaving Maggie Kruse in control of the cellar. So the 2018 is vintage is technically Davis' wine, though with Kruse's hands are all over it. It's classic Jordan: medium-bodied, understated, elegant, lively and age-worthy.

Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat

Longboard Vineyards 2019 DaKine Vineyard Russian River Valley Merlot. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)

Longboard Vineyards 2019 DaKine Vineyard Russian River Valley Merlot ($45)

Owner/winemaker Oded Shakked developed his DaKine Vineyard off Westside Road in Russian River Valley in 2000. He planted pinot noir, of course, but also merlot, cabernet sauvignon and syrah, not content to put all his eggs in one viticultural basket. Shakked, a crazy-mad surfer and former sparkling winemaker at J Vineyards & Winery, shows that not only can merlot have the tannin and acid structure to age beautifully for a decade or more, it can be generous and mouth-filling when young. Also highly recommended are the yeasty, marvelously dry "Z" Brut Late Disgorged sparkling wine ($75) and DaKine Vineyard Russian River Valley Syrah ($55).

Meeker Vineyards 2018 Winemaker's Handprint Sonoma County Merlot ($55)

The winemaker's imprint is on every bottle of Meeker merlot, a reminder that craftsmanship still has a role in producing wine. These days, the bottle imprint duties belong to Lucas Meeker, son of founders Molly and the late Charlie Meeker. Lucas and Charlie shared the responsibility until the elder Meeker's death in 2021. While Lucas honors tradition and shares many of his dad's winemaking philosophies, he also will try anything in the cellar at least once. His swings at

pétillant naturel sparklers, rosés and verdelho have largely connected, particularly with younger drinkers. Yet when it comes to merlot, Meeker leans toward old school/Old World. He's not afraid to bottle wines such as this one that are firmly structured, high in acidity and low in pH (for long-term cellaring), with more time in barrel and bottle before a vintage is released.

Robert Young Estate Winery 2018 Scion Alexander Valley Cabernet Sauvignon ($75)

In 1935 and at the tender age of 16, Robert inherited his family's Alexander Valley ranch after the death of his father, Silas, and began replacing plum trees with wine grapes. In 1963, Robert cultivated cabernet sauvignon and followed with chardonnay. His son, Fred, and his siblings founded Robert Young Estate Winery in 1997. Scion is a tribute to Robert; it's a broad-shouldered, solidly structured cabernet sauvignon built to age for a decade or more. The 2018 Estate Alexander Valley Cabernet Sauvignon ($62) is more accessible now. It's rich in blackberry fruit and accented with cedar, cigar box and vanillin notes.

Roth Estate Winery 2019 Sonoma County Heritage Red ($30)

Wine competition judges love it when a wine they choose as Best of Show — Best of the Best, in this case, in the 2022 Press Democrat North Coast Wine Challenge — turns out to be affordable. This Bordeaux-style blend of cabernet sauvignon, malbec, petit verdot and merlot dazzled the North Coast Wine Challenge judges in the sweepstakes round and was mistaken by some (me, at least) to be a full-bodied red in the $50-and-up range. "Brilliant. Rugged yet handsome. Deep, dense, pleasurable. Male movie star with a chiseled chin" were some of the judges' comments. Roth Estate, an Alexander Valley winery flying the Foley Family Wines ownership flag, also scored another win for consumers with its Best of Class, 2019 Alexander Valley Cabernet Sauvignon ($34).

Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat

Sebastiani Vineyards & Winery 2019 Cherryblock Sonoma Valley Cabernet Sauvignon. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)

Sebastiani Vineyards & Winery 2019 Cherryblock Sonoma Valley Cabernet Sauvignon ($150)

The Cherryblock Vineyard, planted in 1961 north of the Sebastiani winery near downtown Sonoma, contributed 61% of the grapes for this wine. It comes at a hefty price — historical value can command this — and it's Sebastiani's flagship wine. It also reminds that cabernet doesn't have to be grown on hillsides and mountaintops to deserve praise; farming on slopes wasn't a thing 60 years ago. Appreciate Cherryblock for its drinkability, medium body, ripe tannins, juicy black cherry and dark plum fruit, balance and refreshing acidity.

Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat

Serres Ranch Wine 2018 Buchanan Estate Grown Sonoma Valley Merlot. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)

Serres Ranch Wine 2018 Buchanan Estate Grown Sonoma Valley Merlot ($65)

John P. Serres came to San Francisco in 1872 before moving his family to Sonoma County. Since 1924, six generations of Serres have operated the ranch, which includes livestock and blueberry farming in Mendocino County and wine grape growing. Taylor Serres and other fifth-generation members introduced winemaking in 2017, with three wines: this merlot and two other Bordeaux-style red blends. Buchanan is decadently rich and concentrated; its 20% cabernet sauvignon component makes a big impact. The ripe black currant and Damson plum fruit, chocolate-covered cherry and mocha and creamy vanillin are enlivened by bright acidity. There's also Bleusé, a sparkling blend of blueberry fruit and aleatico wine sold in cans.

6 Rhone-style red varietals & blends

Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat

Amphora Wines 2018 Sonoma County GSM. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)

Amphora Wines 2018 Sonoma County GSM ($42)

Owner/winemaker Rick Hutchinson has long had a fondness for Rhone and Italian varietals, plus zinfandel and petite sirah. He's made them whether they were fashionable or not, and he was way ahead of his time by choosing years ago to age some of his wines in clay amphorae he fashioned himself, as the Greeks and Romans did long ago. All the vino kids are into amphorae now, and also into GSMs — blends of grenache, syrah and mourvedre. Hutchinson's 2018 GSM combines the fresh strawberry and red-plum character of grenache, savory meatiness from syrah and the earthiness and structure of mourvedre. His petite sirahs are brawny and loaded with black and blue fruit character. In 2008, he became one of the first California producers of teroldego, a northern Italian varietal.

Jeff Cohn Cellars 2018 Domaine des Chirats Rockpile Vineyard Rockpile Syrah ($95)

Expensive? You bet. Amazing? Yes. Interesting story behind it? Of course. Jeff Cohn, maker of excellent big-bodied syrahs, zinfandels and Rhone-style blends, collaborates on each vintage of this wine with Yves Cuilleron, a noted vigneron in France's northern Rhone Valley. It's made in Sonoma County, from grapes grown in the Rockpile AVA in the northwest part of the county ("chirats" is French for "pile of granite stones"). It's amusing wordplay, though with an authentic partnership and serious intent. That's reflected in the price. The wine is deep purple in color,

with voluptuous, mouth-coating black and blue fruit and classic syrah savoriness. Despite its concentration, it's finely balanced, with what Cohn calls "a liquid mineral component that is the essence of Rockpile Vineyard." Too rich for your blood? Then look to the 2018 El Diablo Vineyard Russian River Valley Grenache ($50), a pretty, firmly structured red that's lip-smacking good.

Pax Mahle Wines 2021 Sonoma Hillsides Sonoma County Syrah ($55)

Pax Mahle is in the vanguard of winemakers using natural and low-intervention methods to produce wine. Such styles aren't everyone's cup of tea, though I find Mahle's syrahs (a specialty of his) are charming far more often than not. He buys only grapes grown organically, sustainably or biodynamically, in cool coastal regions, and adds nothing unnatural to the grapes or wine in the cellar (no commercial yeasts, manufactured nutrients, fining agents, etc.). Mahle also tends to harvest fruit earlier than most, preferring his wines to be lean, crisp, low in alcohol and ideal with food. The Sonoma Hillside Syrah ticks these boxes, as does Mahl's 2020 Sonoma Coast Syrah ($36), though it comes with Pax's own heads-up: Because of smoke from 2020 wildfires, he picked the grapes for this bottling even earlier than normal. Buyers beware, or embrace.

Smith Story Wine Cellars 2021 Brave Carbonic Syrah Sonoma Mountain ($36)

With a name like theirs, Alison and Eric Smith Story are expected to tell some tales. Indeed, they have them. He was born in the Bay Area, she in Fort Worth, Texas. They met while working at K&L Wine Merchants in the Bay Area, eloped in Hawaii in 2013 and planned Smith Story Wine Cellars in their heads. Funded by a Kickstarter campaign in 2014, they began making their wines in Sonoma County from purchased grapes, opened a tasting room in Mendocino's Anderson Valley and adopted a goldendoodle named Lord Sandwich (a regular on Instagram, @SandwichtheDoodle). Then Ali got cancer (she's recovering nicely, it appears) and they recently relocated their tasting room to Bacchus Landing in Healdsburg. So raise a glass of this energetic, fruity syrah in honor of Ali's bravery and that of others experiencing difficult times. Or sit back and savor the couple's 2019 Sonoma County Cabernet Franc ($56) or 2019 Pickberry Vineyard Sonoma Mountain Cabernet Sauvignon ($75).

Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat

Truett Hurst 2019 Estate Dry Creek Valley Petite Sirah. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)

Truett Hurst 2019 Estate Dry Creek Valley Petite Sirah ($56)

Truett Hurst has gone through several management changes over the years, but there is one constant: organic grape growing guru Paul Dolan, who left Fetzer Vineyards in 2002 to get involved in other brands. Petite sirah and zinfandel have played huge roles for Dolan-led wineries, and this not-so-petite wine from the Truett-Hurst estate vineyard in Dry Creek Valley is textbook. It's a big wine, 14.8% alcohol, with black and blue fruit, dark chocolate, espresso and significant yet surprisingly supple tannins. The estate relies on maintaining a healthy "holistic" farming environment, with biodynamic and organic certification — a plus for many consumers. In addition to the petite sirah, winemaker Ross Reedy's 2019 Rattler Rock Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel ($49) and 2019 Estate Zinfandel ($69) are powerhouses.

Two Shepherds 2019 Arya & Austin's Vineyard Russian River Valley Grenache Noir ($38)

Proprietor/winemaker William Allen planted grenache on his estate in 2011, farmed it organically, fermented the fruit with native yeast, aged it for 16 months in neutral oak barrels and used only minimal amounts of sulfur. Natural-wine purists might question any sulfur addition (the compound acts as a preservative), but Allen's low-intervention philosophy serves him well with this spicy, red-fruited wine with a racy finish. Arya and Austin are Australian shepherds, but not the Two Shepherds; the original two are Allen and partner Karen Daenen.