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The Ultimate Buying Guide: California

By [James Laube](#)

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California is flying its flag of diversity like never before. Spurred by a proliferation of new wineries and an expanding range of bottlings that highlights both tradition and innovation, Golden State wine is in boom mode.

The sore spot for many consumers remains prices. With countless acres under vine in its myriad regions, California should rule the roost in terms of affordable wines, but it doesn't. And many of its best wines are very expensive.

Workhorse varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel and Chardonnay will see more competition in the coming year from grapes such as Pinot Noir, Grenache and Syrah. That's healthy for both the established labels and the newbies. At press time, the 2007 harvest appeared mixed, as many vintners throughout the state battled late-season rains and cool weather.

For Cabernet and Merlot, the focus this year will be on 2005, which produced a record-size crop. While quality is high based on preliminary evaluations, the '05s may not in the end be as complex or concentrated as the brilliant 2004s. Many of the young '05 wines (including 2005 Pinots and Zinfandels) show an herbal edge that may fade with time in the bottle. One advantage of the huge crop is that there should be some good values.

Like 2005, 2006 produced a bountiful crop, but I'm impressed by the concentration of wines I've tried from barrel. For Pinot Noir, Syrah and Zinfandel, 2006 is the target vintage, and vintners are enthusiastic about the quality for all three wines. A sleeper grape that seems poised for stardom is Grenache.

For whites, focus on 2005—an excellent year for everything from Chardonnay to Sauvignon Blanc, the latter of which continues to make huge quality strides. Sweetening the pie are the gains made by Viognier, Marsanne and Roussanne, which have all shown marked improvement in recent vintages. Many of the better wines use a combination of two or three of these grapes. As winemakers home in on the best places to grow these varieties, quality is rising and wine lovers are embracing the wines with greater enthusiasm. The rise of unoaked Chardonnay, with flinty acidity and focus, adds yet another welcome alternative.

HIGHLIGHTS

Ampelos

Peter and Rebecca Work own the Ampelos vineyard and brand in Santa Barbara County's Sta. Rita Hills AVA. They offer a half-dozen wines, emphasizing Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir, along with a Syrah and Grenache blend called Syrahe.

Big Basin

Owner and winemaker Bradley Brown had guidance from Rhône specialist John Alban for his winery and vineyards, located in the rugged Santa Cruz Mountains. The wines are big and bold, but

production is limited.

Coho

This partnership between Gary Lipp and Brooks Painter has produced only a handful of vintages but has had great success with Pinot Noir from Stanly Ranch Vineyard in Carneros and with Merlot from Michael Black Vineyard in the Coombsville area of Napa Valley.

Continuum

Tim Mondavi is joined by his father, Robert, and other family members in this new endeavor after leaving their namesake winery. The debut 2005 vintage—80 percent Cabernet with Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot from purchased grapes in Napa Valley—is set for a spring release.

Emeritus

This new venture in Russian River was launched by Brice Jones, founder of Sonoma-Cutrer. This time around, the veteran vintner is working with Sonoma Pinot Noir rather than Chardonnay.

Four Vines

Originally founded by winemaker Christian Tietje as a multi-appellation Zinfandel project, the lineup here now includes Syrah, Petite Sirah, Barbera and Tempranillo—many from vineyards in Paso Robles and Amador. Look for the terrific "Naked" Chardonnay, an unoaked version from Santa Barbara grapes.

Hidden Ridge

With all the new Napa Cabernets on the shelves, here's a hot new Cabernet producer with a 55-acre vineyard on the Sonoma side of the Mayacamas Mountains. The vineyard's closest neighbors are Paloma and Pride, and winemaker Marco DiGiulio has a knack with mountain-grown grapes.

Prospect 772

Founders Ron Pieretti and Wendy Sanda bought a 25-acre parcel in Calaveras County in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, where land is still reasonably priced. Their focus is Rhône varietals, and winemaker Jeff Cohn crafts two wines—The Brat, a Grenache-based blend, and The Brawler, a blend of Syrah and Viognier.

Rhys / Alesia

Kevin Harvey, part of a new generation of vintners in the Santa Cruz Mountains, cultivates 42 acres of vines along the cool and foggy western edge of the mountains. Pinot Noir is the specialty: estate grapes are bottled under the Rhys Vineyards label; purchased fruit from Sonoma Coast and Santa Lucia Highlands goes under the Alesia label.

Toulouse

This small, Anderson Valley Pinot Noir vineyard is owned and operated by Vern and Maxine Boltz. In addition to making their own wine, the Boltzes provide fruit for a vineyard-designated bottling from MacPhail.

Valdez Family Winery

One of California's top vineyard gurus, Ulises Valdez has his own line of Sonoma wines, including Sauvignon Blanc and Zinfandel, soon to be joined by Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Syrah made by Mark Aubert.

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