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Napa Cabs 30 Under \$30

Cult wines aside, great values do exist in Napa Valley. Here's our list of the best Cabernets for \$30 or less.

BY STEVE HEIMOFF



You can hardly blame most folks for associating the words “Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon” with “expensive.” True, Napa doesn't yet rival Bordeaux in exorbitant pricing (and let's hope it won't; a bottle of 2009 Château Lafite Rothschild will set you back at least \$1,500). But the number of \$100-plus bottles of the best Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (and Bordeaux-style blends, too) is in the dozens.

In fact, of the 40 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignons Wine Enthusiast rated above 94 points and published throughout the past year (June 2011 to present), 22 cost between \$100 and \$625, and all but one are over \$50. Yes, these wines generally are magnificent. Sadly, most consumers will never taste them. But such is the topsy-turvy nature of today's marketplace that wine lovers can still find excellent Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon for \$30 or less. These wines may not have quite the depth or complexity of the very top tier, but they come pretty close.

Many wineries are struggling and have had to drop prices or offload their product to négociants, who then bottle the wines under new, often inexpensive, brand names. Or, increasingly, wineries are creating entirely new brands to sell at popular prices. Whatever the circumstance, the big winner is the consumer.

93 Conn Creek 2007 Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley).

abv: 14.5% **Price:** \$25

Conn Creek was one of Napa Valley's more promising boutique wineries when it began in 1973. In 1986, Washington State-based Stimson Lane Vineyards & Estates (now Ste. Michelle Wine Estates) purchased the winery.

With Conn Creek's release of five new Cabernet Sauvignons from the great 2007 vintage, it has clearly reclaimed its relevance. The '07 Napa Cabernet—rich, dry and full-bodied—shows a mastery of the blender's art, with grapes for this 100% Cabernet hailing from eight subappellations, including St. Helena, Stags Leap, Mt. Veeder, Atlas Peak and Spring Mountain. Conn Creek's winemaker since 2009 has been Mike McGrath, who previously worked at Charles Krug, William Hill and Villa Mt. Eden. However, the '07 Napa Cab was made by his predecessor, Jeff McBride, who now is at Benziger. 20,000 cases produced.

92 Edge 2009 Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley).**abv:** 13.8% **Price:** \$20**90 Fuse 2009 Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley).****abv:** 14.6% **Price:** \$22

These two wines—Edge and Fuse—are produced by the well-known, ultrapremium Napa Valley winery Signorello Estate, which for more than two decades has been crafting highly regarded wines, including its luxury Meritage-style Padrone. Proprietor Ray Signorello Jr. launched Edge in 2001.

“Ray felt there was an opportunity to capture that Napa Valley value demographic, and he wanted to be one of the first to market it,” explains David Zurowski, Signorello Estate’s director of marketing and consumer experiences. Fuse followed in 2006.

“It was on the heels of the dot-com collapse and September 11, which allowed me to get grapes at a good price,” recalls Signorello Jr., citing falling consumer demand. “Then, with Edge’s success, I started Fuse as a next step up. We hit the market with both wines at a reasonable price.”

Edge is always a varietal Cabernet Sauvignon, often with a small percentage of Merlot blended in, while Fuse is mostly Cabernet Sauvignon, with Merlot and Syrah. Signorello Jr. has just released a new brand, Trim, based on North Coast Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc, and it retails for around \$10.

The release of less expensive wines by a luxury-tier winery presents the proprietor with a dilemma: to associate the different brands, or try to keep them separate in the consumer’s mind. “Neither [Edge nor Fuse] says ‘Signorello’ on the label,” notes Signorello Jr. “They’re all separate companies.”

He even brought in partners to help run the companies to further dissociate the value wines from the Signorello Estate brand. But this is all to the consumer’s benefit. Edge and Fuse are both excellent wines.

“I tried to take what I’ve learned over the years, but at a lower price point,” says Signorello Jr. Grapes for both brands come partly from Signorello Estate’s vineyards, while others are purchased. The two value brands are produced at a custom-crush facility in Napa Valley known as The Ranch Winery. For the 2009 vintage, Edge production was 20,000 cases, while Fuse came in at 3,425 cases.

92 B Side 2009 Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley).**abv:** 14.7% **Price:** \$25

The name of this Cabernet, “B Side,” comes from the days of vinyl records. “It’s that gem of a track that’s on the other side of the hit song,” says Greg Kitchens, the winemaker who is responsible for the red wines of the well-known négociant firm, Don Sebastiani & Sons (Smoking Loon, Aquinas, Pepperwood Grove and others, as well as B Side).

The 37-year-old Kitchens, who’s been with the Sebastiani family since 1999, describes Don & Sons as “a value wine company. With B Side, we decided to go after big Napa Valley, but at a value.”

By “big Napa Valley,” Kitchens means, “It’s coming up with everything you’d want in Napa, at a third of the price you expect to pay.” Because of confidentiality agreements, he can’t legally identify where most of the grapes came from, but points out that 2009 was a very good year to buy bulk premium wine from wineries that had to offload excess inventory. “You can say that some of them are right on Highway 29 in the Oakville-Rutherford area.” 8,500 6-packs produced.

91 Martin Ray 2009 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley).**abv:** 14.6% **Price:** \$25

This historic winery traces its roots to 1936, when stockbroker Martin Ray bought the old Paul Masson Winery in the Santa Cruz Mountains. It has seen lots of changes since then. Most recently, Courtney Benham, a third-generation Californian whose father owned a winery in the Sacramento Delta, purchased the winery in 1990.

Martin Ray has been on a roll lately with a series of great Cabernets from mountain appellations, and this 2009 Napa Valley Reserve is almost as rich as those more expensive bottlings. Made from 100% Cab, it's mostly Yountville grapes, with fruit from Howell Mountain and Diamond Mountain for additional intensity.

Winemaker Bill Batchelor says it's important for Martin Ray to produce such a value Cabernet. "It helps with brand recognition," he says. "People taste it, and it can be a lead-in for our mountain reserve wines," which retail for 2–3 times the price. 500 cases produced.

91 Franciscan 2008 Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley).

abv: 13.5% **Price:** \$27

Franciscan began as a small boutique winery in 1973, then passed through a series of owners (including the founders of Silver Oak) over the next decade, all the while achieving a reputation as a good source of varietal wine. Wine and spirits giant Constellation purchased the winery in 1999.

The winery's most successful offerings throughout have been the Cabernet Sauvignons, whose source of inspiration is the Oakville estate vineyard, which comprises 15% of the blend in 2008. The remainder is sourced from vineyards in Rutherford, Yountville and Oak Knoll.

Director of Winemaking Janet Myers credits her array of fermenters, 160 in all, for the wine's quality. "I can give each block of grapes the attention it wants," she says, heating and cooling to precise specifications and extending the macerations as long as she needs to. Myers doesn't have to rush the wines out of tank in order to make room for the next batch. 90,000 cases produced.

91 Robert Mondavi 2009 Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley).

abv: 14.5% **Price:** \$28

Nearly one-third of the grapes that comprise this wine come from Mondavi's portion of the famed To Kalon Vineyard. The winery's top-tier To Kalon Cabernet Sauvignon retails around \$250, so how did Genevieve Janssens, Mondavi's director of winemaking, keep the price on the 2009 Cabernet so modest?

"It's geology," she says. "The closer to the Napa River you go, the more 'villages' the wines are," alluding to Burgundy. As To Kalon edges toward the river, the soils get deeper and richer, and, in general, are not conducive to making Mondavi's reserve wines.

However, that doesn't mean the grapes are inferior, Janssens says. The remaining fruit for the '09 is mostly from Mondavi's Wappo Hill Vineyard, in the Stags Leap District.

Janssens's vinification of the Napa Valley Cabernet is similar to her approach to Mondavi's Reserve Cabernet, except that the wine is fermented in stainless steel rather than oak tanks, ages in a smaller proportion of new French oak and is held back six fewer months before release. 107,540 cases produced.

91 Black Stallion 2009 Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley).

abv: 14.5% **Price:** \$25

Black Stallion's winemaker, David Ostheimer, calls this his "entry-level Cab, the most commercially available."

Although it's just a fraction of the price of the winery's \$150 Bucephalus bottling, it's close to it in spirit, which Ostheimer credits to superior viticulture and purchased fruit from Rutherford, Stags Leap District, Oak Knoll, Oakville, Pope Valley and Wooden Valley. Give credit, too, to Ostheimer's previous experience managing Gallo's premium wine unit, which included such Cabernetcentric houses as Louis M. Martini and William Hill.

He notes that the value aspect of the 2009 Cabernet is a reflection of the philosophy of Black Stallion's owners, the Indelicato family: "Let's make our wines as good or better than anyone else, at a price everyone can afford. That's the premise of everything we do in this company." 9,000 cases produced.

90 St. Supéry 2007 Estate Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley).**abv:** 14.3% **Price:** \$30

St. Supéry has a long, distinguished history of producing upscale Cabernets from its Dollarhide Ranch, but it's pricey. So is its Rutherford Estate bottling; both wines retail for around \$85.

This 2007 Estate Cabernet, at about one-third the cost, actually is comprised of fruit from both Dollarhide and Rutherford. Winemaker Michael Scholz explains that the grapes come from parcels in both vineyards that aren't concentrated enough for the more expensive wines.

Although the grapes result from a sort of declassification, that doesn't mean the wine is second class. As Scholz describes the '07 Estate, "It has structure, but is approachable. It's serious, but somewhat kind."

At 4½ years of age, it's also showing some of the mellowing that comes with a few years in the cellar, which makes it a particularly good value. 23,850 cases produced.

91 Oberon 2009 Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley).**abv:** 13.7% **Price:** \$22

Oberon is one of the brands owned by Folio Fine Wine Partners, the company founded in 2004 by Michael Mondavi.

"Michael's idea was to put together a portfolio of wines from historic families from around the world," explains Tony Coltrin, Folio's director of winemaking and partner. The foreign wines are imported by Folio, but the company also wanted its own labels from California, which, in addition to Oberon, include Hangtime, Isabel, Emblem and others.

The success of the 2009 Oberon Cabernet Sauvignon is due to a couple of factors. "In 2009, I was finally able to buy grapes from an Oakville grower I'd been trying to work my way into for a while," says Coltrin. "Also, I finally got some Petit Verdot from Michael [Mondavi]'s Oso Vineyard [northeast of Howell Mountain], which brings in wonderful hue and aromatics."

Coltrin added a splash of Petite Sirah to the blend. "Petite Sirah marries with Cabernet in a way you can't imagine," he says. "It brings structure, and draws the finish out." 30,000 cases produced.

20 More Great Values in Napa Cab

90 Buehler 2009 Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley).**abv:** 14.6% **Price:** \$25**[90 Decoy 2009 Cabernet Sauvignon \(Napa Valley\).](#)****abv:** 14.5% **Price:** \$25**[90 Evolve 2009 Cabernet Sauvignon \(Mount Veeder\).](#)****abv:** 14.4% **Price:** \$30**[90 Q 2009 Cabernet Sauvignon \(Napa Valley\).](#)****abv:** 13.5% **Price:** \$18**[90 Summers 2009 Cabernet Sauvignon \(Calistoga\).](#)****abv:** 14.1% **Price:** \$26**[89 Napa Family Vineyards 2010 Cabernet Sauvignon \(Napa Valley\). Best Buy.](#)****abv:** 13.5% **Price:** \$10**[89 Trailhead 2010 Cabernet Sauvignon \(Napa Valley\).](#)****abv:** 14.5% **Price:** \$30

88 Aquinas 2007 Philosopher's Blend Reserve Red (Napa Valley).

abv: 14.9% Price: \$25

88 Ca' Momi 2009 Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley).

abv: 13.9% Price: \$25

[88 Cameron Hughes 2007 Lot 287 Cabernet Sauvignon \(Napa Valley\).](#)

abv: 14.5% Price: \$20

[88 Goyette 2009 Cabernet Sauvignon \(Napa Valley\).](#)

abv: 14.7% Price: \$24

88 Mario Perelli-Minetti 2008 Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley).

abv: 14.5% Price: \$23

87 C&B 2009 Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley). Best Buy.

abv: 14.1% Price: \$12.

[87 Cameron Hughes 2008 Lot 290 Cabernet Sauvignon \(Spring Mountain\).](#)

abv: 14.8% Price: \$22

[87 Heritage 2008 Cabernet Sauvignon \(Napa Valley\).](#)

abv: 13.8% Price: \$28

[87 Napa Station 2008 Cabernet Sauvignon \(Napa Valley\).](#)

abv: 14.5% Price: \$22

[87 Newton 2009 Red Label Cabernet Sauvignon \(Napa County\).](#)

abv: 13.5% Price: \$28

87 Round Pond 2009 Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley).

abv: 14.5% Price: \$30

[86 Avalon 2009 Cabernet Sauvignon \(Napa Valley\).](#)

abv: 13.8% Price: \$18

[86 Castle Rock 2009 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon \(Napa Valley\).](#)

abv: 14.5% Price: \$18

Spezzatino con Polenta

Courtesy Chef Dario De Conti of Ca' Momi Enoteca, Napa CA,

The Italian word, spezzatino—meaning “broken into pieces” in Italian—refers to the beef in this dish, which is cut into cubes. “But in our minds, the flavors are anything but broken,” says Conti. The hearty stew marries beautifully with a rich Cabernet Sauvignon.

1 beef shoulder, approximately 1 pound, cut into 1-inch cubes

White flour, as needed

Salt, to taste

Black pepper, to taste

2 ounces extra virgin olive oil

2 tablespoons butter

2 small yellow onions, diced

2 small carrots, diced

2 small celery stalks, diced

- 1 cup lardo (or pancetta), chopped
- 2 tablespoons fresh rosemary
- 2/3 cup red wine, preferably unoaked
- 1 sage sprig
- 1 cup vegetable broth or water
- 9 ounces organic tomatoes, chopped
- 1/3 cup polenta
- 1 cup water
- Micro- basil leaves, for garnish

Preheat an oven to 275°F.

Toss the beef in the flour, salt and pepper and set aside. In a large skillet, heat the oil and butter, then add the onion, carrot, celery and lardo, and sauté until the ingredients are tender. Add the beef and rosemary, and sauté, browning the beef on all sides for approximately 20 minutes. Next, add the wine and cook off the alcohol for approximately 5 minutes.

Transfer the ingredients to a deep pan and add the sage, water (or broth) and tomatoes. Cover completely and bake for 3–4 hours, or until the beef is tender.

In a medium saucepan, boil water. Once boiled, add the polenta and salt to taste, whisking constantly for about 40 minutes. Once ready, pour the polenta onto a serving bowl, place the spezzatino on top and garnish with micro basil and a drizzle of olive oil.

Wine recommendation: Chef De Conti likes to pair this dish with his own Ca' Momi 2009 Cabernet Sauvignon. "It's very rich, juicy, and beef stew is the perfect pairing in the mouth. The alcohol is a component that helps to digest the fiber of the meat, and also the fat," Conti says.