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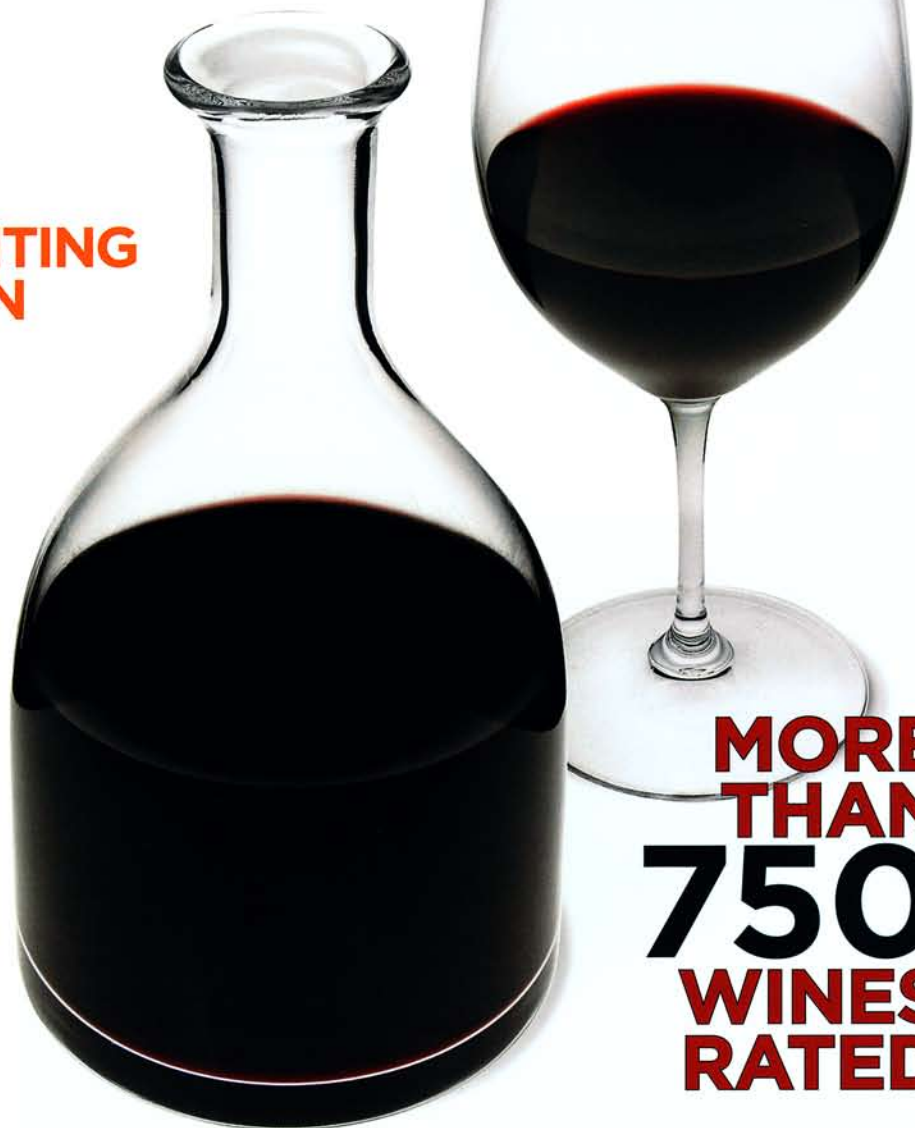
THE CABERNET REPORT

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NOV. 15, 2008
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California Cabernet's

Win-Win Vintage

BY
JAMES LAUBE

Consider 2005 as the best of both worlds for California Cabernet Sauvignon. It provided a huge crop and also an abundance of great wines. So it's a win-win for Cabernet drinkers.

The vintage's quantity and quality caught winemakers by surprise, because a huge crop often means that getting all the grapes to ripen at the same time—or even to ripen at all—will be a challenge. But mild weather during the growing season and diligent vineyard management allowed winemakers who thinned their crops to get the ripeness and range of flavors for outstanding wines.

• HIGH QUALITY
• MARKS A BIG
• 2005 HARVEST,
• WITH NAPA
• VALLEY LEADING
• THE WAY



Phillip Corallo-Titus surveys the raw materials at Chappellet winery's Pritchard Hill vineyard, located on the east side of Napa Valley.

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“The '05 vintage is a poster child for the saying that great wines are made in the vineyard.”

—Phillip Corallo-Titus, winemaker

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Since last year's Cabernet report (“California's Surprising 2004 Cabernets,” Nov. 15, 2007), we've tasted a record 761 new-release varietal Cabernet Sauvignons and Cabernet blends from the Golden State in our Napa office. Most are from 2005, with more than 520 bottlings. But there are plenty of wines from the excellent 2004 vintage too, with more than 170 reviewed.

All together, nearly 140 2005s rated 90 to 94 points, or outstanding, on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale, an impressive number that is indicative of the vintage's quality and depth. Nineteen earned

classic ratings of 95 to 100 points. I rate the 2005 Cabernet Sauvignon vintage 93 points in Napa and 84 points in Sonoma.

Many of the highest-rated '05s are names familiar to Cab lovers: Colgin, Hartwell, Paul Hobbs, Schrader, Carter, Gemstone, Chappellet, Bond, Merus and Screaming Eagle. They are pricey as well, ranging from \$75 a bottle, for Carter's Beckstoffer To Kalon, to \$275, for Colgin's offerings, to a stratospheric \$750, for Screaming Eagle.

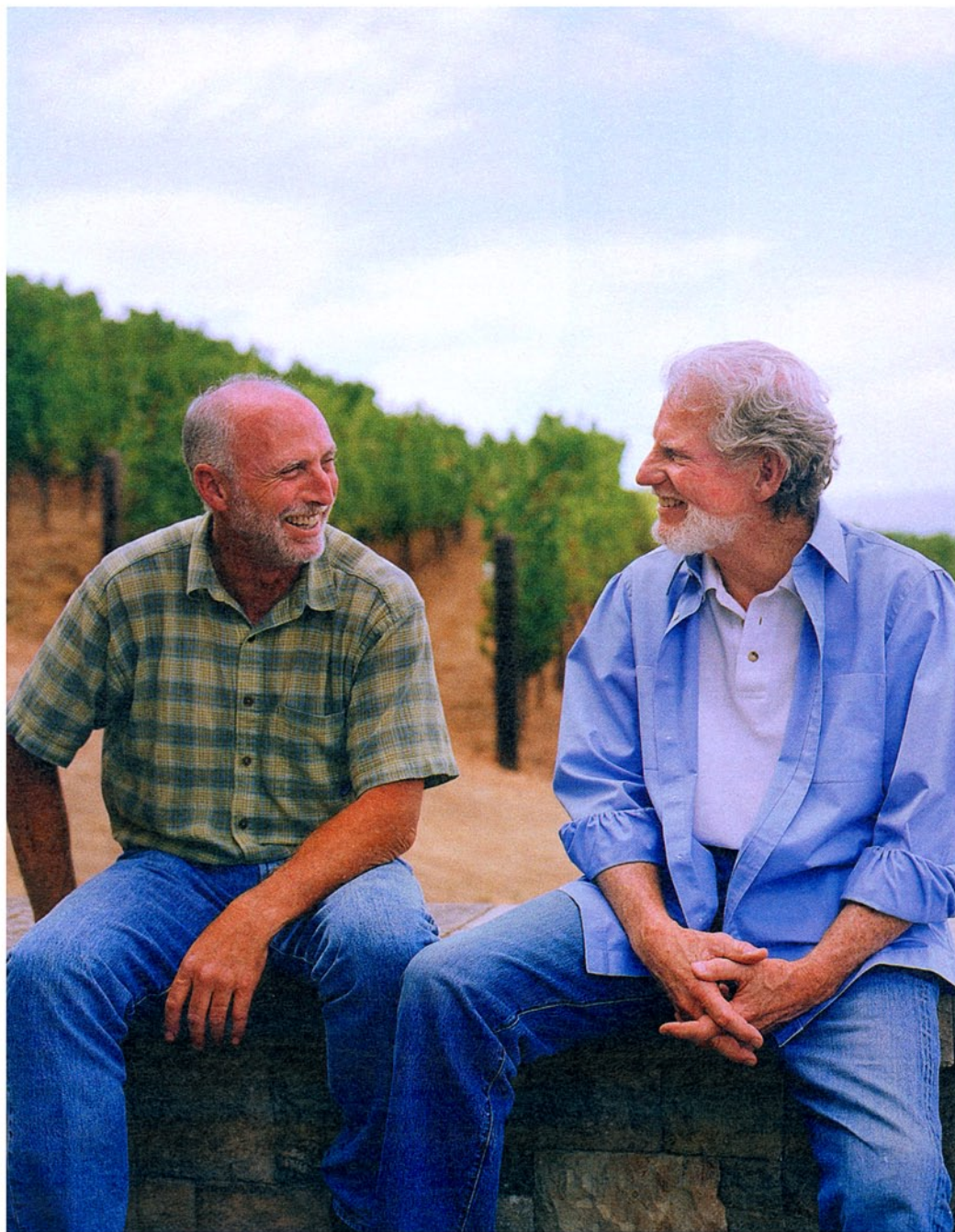
One dominant thread is how many great Cabernets hail from Beckstoffer sites, most notably the acclaimed To Kalon vineyard, made famous by Robert Mondavi Winery, which first introduced the name by using it on its Cabernet and Fumé Blanc bottlings. This Cabernet turf is in west Oakville and has long been one of Napa's best spots for this variety. In the past year, of the 21 Cabernets that carry the Beckstoffer name (owner Andy Beckstoffer also owns also vineyards outside Oakville), 16 scored 90 or higher, and 11 of those came from To Kalon.

Peter Michael's Les Pavots 2005 (97, \$175), from Sonoma's Knights Valley, remains the sole non-Napa Cabernet superstar. This Cabernet is indeed not only one of the California's finest, but

unique in that until recently there were few other vineyards planted near the site. The Cabernet (as well as the Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc) are grown on steep, hillsides rising along the backside of Mount St. Helena, which separates Calistoga, in northern Napa, from Knights Valley. Peter Michael winemakers have included Helen Turley and Mark Aubert; currently, Nicolas Morlet oversees the cellars.

Some tremendous debut wines came from 2005, topped by Futo Oakville (96, \$200), Ovid Napa (94, \$175) and Seven Stones Napa (94, \$175), and from 2004, the Levy & McClellan Napa Valley (95, \$350). Profiles of these and four other up-and-coming producers begin on page 69. Their stories provide insights into the rapidly growing and changing world of California Cabernet.

For \$50 or less, plenty of good Napa wines can be found, including bottlings from Bennett Lane, Buehler, Honig, Cliff Lede, Melka, O'Brien, Snowden, Stephanie and Turnbull. Several excellent 2005s for \$35 or less include Beringer Knights Valley (88, \$27), Sbragia Cabernet Sauvignon Dry Creek Valley Andolsen Vineyard



Winemaker Bob Levy (left) with vintner Bill Harlan. The pair is the driving force behind some of Napa's most successful Cabernets.

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“2004 is to me classic California ripe fruit—sometimes very ripe and in your face.”

—*Bob Levy, winemaker*

.....
 (89, \$35), Roots Run Deep Napa Valley Educated Guess (88, \$20), Justin Paso Robles (88, \$26), Ahnfeldt Napa Provocative (88, \$29), Beaulieu Rutherford (88, \$27) and Villa Mt. Eden Napa Valley Grand Reserve (88, \$15). If you are new to Cabernet, this is a good price point for exploration.

The world of Napa Cabernet continues to expand, though mostly with high-priced, small-production wines. Prices are escalating, often to startling heights compared with those for other California wines. The average price for an outstanding (90 to 94 points) 2005 is \$119 a bottle, nearly double what it was a decade ago. That's expensive, but not quite in the league of top-rated Bordeaux, many of which sell for three to four times as much (the 2005 Château Margaux sold for \$1,080 on release), or even the best from Tuscany, Burgundy or Piedmont. The market demand for elite bottlings seems insatiable, and their vintners are able to charge high prices the world over because of high quality and limited production.

Ever since the surge in popularity of the cult Cabernets of the 1990s, small-production wines have taken center stage in California. Given the current trends and techniques, in which winemakers can make a great wine from 1 or 2 acres, consumers can only expect a continued proliferation of small, hard-to-get, mail-order-only wines. Prime examples are the lineup of single vineyard wines by Colgin, which has several Cabernet bottlings, or Beckstoffer, where one grower sells grapes to nearly two dozen vintners. Production

volumes for most of these wines are 500 cases or less.

Napa's Cabernet acreage is still comparatively small, with 19,000 acres out of the AVA's total of 45,000 vineyard acres. The districts with the most plantings lie in the center of the valley, from Yountville to Oakville and Rutherford. The Stags Leap and Carneros districts have fewer acres. Appellations such as Diamond Mountain, Mount Veeder and Howell Mountain are smaller still.

In tandem with the growth of the smaller-production wines is the continued search for new Cabernet *terroir*. Most of the discoveries are on hillsides, above the valley floor. For example, Pritchard Hill, located east of Rutherford, is home to a growing number of cutting-edge vintners, including newcomers Ovid and, soon, Continuum, Tim Mondavi's new winery, which purchased a vineyard there this year. Stagecoach, a large vineyard east of Oakville close

James Laube's California Cabernet Values

For complete reviews, see our Buying Guides or the Wine Ratings search at www.winespectator.com.
An alphabetical listing of all wines tasted for this report begins on page 88.

WINE	SCORE	PRICE	WINE	SCORE	PRICE
BUHLER Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2005 Well-proportioned, with spicy currant, blackberry, cedar and mineral notes, picking up a hint of anise on the finish.	90	\$27	AQUINAS Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2005 A bit rustic, but very tasty, showing tangy cherry, plum, cassis and cedar notes, with a splash of fresh mint.	87	\$14
BEAULIEU VINEYARD Cabernet Sauvignon Rutherford 2005 Smooth and spicy, offering supple currant, black cherry, plum and hints of lavender. Delightful, with supple tannins.	88	\$27	BISHOP'S PEAK Rock Solid Red Paso Robles 2004 Firm and focused, with spicy wild berry, blackberry, herb and cedary notes that are focused and persistent.	87	\$12
BERINGER Cabernet Sauvignon Knights Valley 2005 Dark, rich, chocolaty style, with concentrated currant, blackberry and black cherry fruit that's well-centered.	88	\$27	THE HESS COLLECTION Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Allomi Vineyard 2005 Sleek and tight, with ripe, spicy, minty dried currant and blackberry fruit. Finishes with dry, cedary tannins.	87	\$25
BONTERRA Cabernet Sauvignon Mendocino County 2006 Supple, elegant and polished, with ripe, fleshy plum, black cherry, mineral, spice and light cedary oak.	88	\$16	J. LOHR Cabernet Sauvignon Paso Robles Seven Oaks 2004 Rich and focused, with grapey currant, herb and vanilla bean oak flavors that are intense and persistent.	87	\$15
JUSTIN Cabernet Sauvignon Paso Robles 2005 Rich and intense, with potent currant, leather, roasted coffee and nuts. Holds its focus.	88	\$26	PAVILION Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2006 Vivid ripe blackberry, blueberry and plum notes.	87	\$13
ROOTS RUN DEEP Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Educated Guess 2005 Tight, with rich, spicy dried currant, blackberry, sage, dusty berry and mineral notes that pick up a meaty, gamy edge.	88	\$20	MARTIN RAY Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2005 Rich currant, light cedary oak, a dash of herb and sage.	87	\$20
VILLA MT. EDEN Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Grand Reserve 2005 Supple and elegant, this is a touch earthy and savory, with spicy black cherry and wild berry fruit.	88	\$15	SEBASTIANI Cabernet Sauvignon Sonoma County 2005 Firm band of dried currant, spice, cedary oak and floral notes.	87	\$18
			THIRTY NINE DEGREES Cabernet Sauvignon Lake County 2004 Plum and black cherry fruit that's elegant and polished.	87	\$14