

Napa Valley Cabernet: 2018 vintage report

The best wines show control, poise and transparency between vineyard and appellation, with most of the 2018s well integrated and tastefully seasoned with oak, says Matthew Luczy, who rates 250 wines from the 2018 vintage

Matthew Luczy
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Credit: Napa Valley Vintners

The 2018 vintage in Napa Valley belongs in an echelon with the finest of the past two decades. It was absent of challenges that plagued many of the previous years, ranging from drought, low yields and heatwaves.

It was spared in the second most destructive wildfire season in California's history, behind only 2020. The best wines show control, poise and transparency between vineyard and appellation.

Scroll down to see Matthew Luzcy's top-scoring 2018 Napa Cabernets

When compared to recent vintages, it is most synonymous with the highly acclaimed 2016. 'There were a lot of synergies in both the growing season and the wines. They have a lot of the same energy, expression and life' explains Chris Carpenter, winemaker for Lokoya, Cardinale, La Jota and Mt Brave, all part of the large Jackson Family Wines portfolio.

In terms of weather, 'slow' and 'easy' were consistent descriptors. After the heatwaves and wildfires of 2017, this calm was met with open arms. Pilcrow's Jonah Beer says: 'Mother Nature allowed us to walk through the vintage rather than sprint. Everything came in like a parade instead of a stampede.'

Quick links

Individual AVA analysis and top-scoring wines **coming soon**:
Calistoga, Coombsville, Howell Mountain, Mount Veeder, Oakville, Rutherford, St Helena, Stags Leap District

Wines of the vintage:

[Corison, Kronos Vineyard 97 pts](#) | [Kapscándy, Grand Vin, State Lane Vineyard 97 pts](#)

Full verdict

Chimney Rock winemaker Elizabeth Vianna gave similar praise, saying ‘2018 is a beautiful, cool vintage. We got fully ripe but nothing was overripe. The fruit integrity was pristine and there were no heat spikes. It was just a dream.’

Winter brought February rains, leading to a temperate, dry spring. Budbreak and flowering occurred slightly later than normal, and summer was warm overall. Dan Petroski at Larkmead points out: ‘It was a cooler year, but when I say “cool”, it was still 90°F [32°C]. That’s “cool” in Napa.’

Cathy Corison also recalls the atypical summer. ‘It dipped into the 20°C/70°Fs! That’s crazy in Napa! It never got over 35°C/95°F for all of July, August and September.’ She also notes the deep colour of the wines, saying ‘You could write a letter with them.’

Due to the mild spring and generous flowering of 2017, yields were up 20% to 30% on average.

Harvests like this almost remove the variable of vintage altogether, producers being left free to express their individual styles. At the end of the day, wine is made by people, and people are influenced by culture, timing and incentives. 2018 could be likened to a smooth flight; even without turbulence, the pilot still has to fly the plane and land it.

See all of the wines in the Napa Valley Cabernet 2018 vintage report here

Maintaining historical perspective is important when assessing any vintage, and Napa Valley has undergone many distinct phases. The 1960s began the ‘Second Golden Age’, and the ’70s placed the region on the world stage. The 1980s introduced wide-scale irrigation, as well as a bout of phylloxera that caused numerous replantings.

The '90s gave rise to cult wines: mailing-list-only wineries showered with lofty scores. The dotcom boom and resultant real estate values dramatically elevated vineyard prices throughout California. The influence of critics with penchants for punchy and slick wines brought about noticeable standardisation and uniformity, especially among elite producers.

The mid-2000s were arguably the peak of the ripeness and oak craze, with the cooler 2010 and 2011 vintages initially correcting for some of this escalation. Movements like *In Pursuit of Balance* and the *Somm* documentary series brought awareness to the merits of balanced wines and those whose passion is educating consumers about them. It was the beginning of a sea change.

Winemakers, viticulturists, PR firms and winery presidents alike spoke of a 'return to our roots', a 'reeling in' and 'dialing back' of ripeness and extraction. However, based on the 330 samples reviewed for this report, this largely doesn't seem to be the case.

The back-to-back blockbuster vintages of 2012 and 2013 largely kickstarted the ripeness parade all over again. As the decade has progressed, many producers seem to be saying one thing and doing another.

Napa Valley area under vine by variety

Cabernet Sauvignon 8,800ha

Merlot 1,681ha

Cabernet Franc 444ha

Petit Verdot 296ha

Malbec 194ha

Past vintages guide (out of 5)

2018 4.5

2017 3

2016 4.5

2015 4

2014 4.5

2013 4.5

2012 4.5

2011 3.5

2010 4

2009 4

From the valley floor to mountain slopes, northern Calistoga to southern Coombsville, the average alcohol-by-volume of the wines submitted was 14.7%. In a vintage like 2018, this can't help but feel excessive. Numerous examples simply burned on the nose and finish – and not just wines labelled upwards of 15%.

If the ageing potential of a fine wine is a factor in its perceived value, these levels are worrisome. Ethanol is static, thus a wine that is overtly hot in its youth will only be edged further out of balance as time sheds the fruit around it.

Is the variance and complexity of Napa's terroir truly being expressed, or is uniformity and manipulation permeating and masking it? A circumstance akin to The Emperor's New Clothes appears to be the answer in many cases. There seem to be precious few influential wineries truly producing hands-off wines, and far too many where narratives of 'expressing place' are varying degrees of disingenuous.

On multiple occasions, I was quoted sugar levels at harvest that equate to 16%+abv on wines labelled 14.5% or thereabouts. This indicates that either grapes were harvested extremely ripe and watered back, altered with reverse osmosis post-fermentation, left with residual sugar, or some combination thereof. An opposite but still-bothersome situation was a winemaker commenting that a wine was less than 14%, but they were uneasy to label it as such due to consumer perception of a 'lighter' style.

An aside regarding California's labelling laws: if a wine is less than 14%, the producer has 1.5% of labelling leeway in either direction. Above 14%, a 1% change is allowed. Tax rates increase by 38% on wines above the threshold, and the tolerance cannot be used to dodge this.

In the case of manipulation, such practices quickly begin a domino effect. Water additions pre-fermentation dilute the skin-to-juice ratio of grape must, lowering the amount of flavour extraction possible. To maintain concentration in the finished wine, a portion of must is bled off and an equal – but often less – amount of water is added back.

Must contains nutrients, sugar, phenolic compounds and acidity. Water additions replace the volume lost (sans nutrients) but also raise pH, making the must more susceptible to microbial issues. To ensure stability, acid and increased sulphur additions are now necessary, as is sterile-filtration prior to bottling in many instances.

These actions quite literally strip a wine of its true character. It appears the Emperor is not only unclothed, but stands on a house of cards.

To be clear, this is not a manifesto seeking the return to a bygone era where storied wineries struggled to reach 12.5% (many of whom adjusted chemistry in the cellar as well) nor is it a slight towards consumers that genuinely enjoy riper flavours.

Napa currently has the potential to make the best wines it ever has.

We know considerably more now than in decades past about how vine spacing, rootstocks, clone selection, canopy management and yeast strains affect a finished wine. Great progress has been made in the once-prevalent, obvious over-usage of new oak, which couldn't have been said earlier in the decade. The majority of the 2018s I tasted were remarkably tastefully seasoned and well-integrated with their oak.

What is troubling is the pervasiveness and normalisation of this slipping-of-the-leash in terms of balance, especially as wine prices perpetually escalate. It brings to mind the aphorism 'rising tides raise all ships'. In this instance, however, the tide is weakening the hulls and leaks are springing.

2018 was a blank canvas for each winemaking team. As much as producing world-class wine is contingent on grape quality, it is equally dependent on choices in the cellar. Over-treatment muddies the identity of any wine, however amenable the weather is.

There is more than enough diversity and diligence to go around in Napa. It is very possible for producers to make decadent wines which retain balance and authenticity, while their neighbours hang their hat on more understated expressions.

It is up to those who influence the wine world – producers, consumers and journalists alike – to call spade a spade and encourage sensible practices that highlight rather than conceal. We need a 'Third Golden Age' in the Napa Valley.

See Matthew Luzcy's top-scoring 2018 Napa Cabernets



Corison, Kronos Vineyard, Napa Valley, St Helena, 2018

[+ Add to My Wines](#)

Corison's Kronos Vineyard is one of the great Cabernet vineyards on earth, and an anomaly in the modern Napa Valley landscape. Planted in 1971 on bale loam with Saint George rootstock. The yields are extremely low, averaging just 0.5 tonnes to the hectare. Clean, clear, radiant aromas of blue-and-purple fruits,...

Points **97**



Kapcsandy Family Wines, Grand Vin State Lane Vineyard, Napa Valley, 2018

+ [Add to My Wines](#)

A truly exceptional wine. The very definition of feminine, perfumed and entralling on the nose, with aromas of fresh flowers, bath soaps, orchard blossoms and raspberry sorbet. Its texture has a silky, weightless quality before delivering sumptuous, refined tannins and a simply stunning finish. Seductive in style, and brings to...

Points **97**



Larkmead, Solari, Napa Valley, California, USA, 2018

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The flagship single-vineyard wine from Dan Petroski at Larkmead is remarkable in 2018. Comprised of two parcels at the southern border of Calistoga, bordering St. Helena. Soils are a combination of Cortina gravel and Pleasanton clay. A major level up in every dimension from the already fantastic Napa Valley Cabernet,...

Points **97**



Lokoya, Napa Valley, Mt Veeder, California, USA, 2018

+ Add to My Wines

There is a palpably regal quality to all four Lokoya wines, but the Mount Veeder Cabernet attains an additional level of purity and class. There is a softness to the nose that is only additive, taking nothing away from the muscular, firm core underneath. The finish is granular, burly and...

Points **97**



Meteor Vineyard, Special Family Reserve, Napa Valley, 2018

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The Special Family Reserve takes Meteor vineyard to another level entirely, and is unquestionably one of the definitive wines of the Coombsville appellation. Exotic, enthralling and flashy on the nose, giving off a sense it is currently simmering, planning out its boiling point over the next three decades. As floral...

Points **96**



Dalla Valle Vineyards, Maya, Napa Valley, Oakville, 2018

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Dalla Valle's legendary blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc. Instantly seductive and supple on the nose, with a chocolatey, plummy richness that elegantly pulls you into the glass. A soft, silky and giving palate slingshots into brighter, more red-fruited notes than the nose would suggest. The finish is classy...

Points **96**



Lokoya, Napa Valley, Howell Mountain, California, USA, 2018

+ Add to My Wines

A luxurious, decadent and refined nose. Where many mountain-Cabernets may be sharp and rugged in their youth, the Lokoya Howell Mountain Cabernet is remarkably integrated right out of the gate. The texture bounces between polished and rustic, punchy and ethereal. Will age effortlessly for at least three decades. A powerhouse...

Points **96**



Inglenook, Rubicon, Napa Valley, Rutherford, 2018

[+ Add to My Wines](#)

One would be hard-pressed to find a more definitive showing of Rutherford Cabernet Sauvignon. Just enough oak-treatment apparent on the nose to add complexity, melting perfectly into the brooding, dark black fruits underneath. The palate is plush, forward and dusty with a subtle, snappy quality to the finish. It has...

Points **96**



Marston Family Vineyard, Napa Valley, Spring Mountain, 2018

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An earth-forward showing of Spring Mountain, with aromas of tilled earth, moss and dried leather. Perfectly ripe raspberries, pomegranate skin and oolong tea on the palate with a dynamic and vibrant palate. The finish is multilayered and harmonious.

Impressively well-put-together right out of the gate but should absolutely be cellared...

Points **95**



Pilcrow, Granite Lake, Napa Valley, Howell Mountain, 2018

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Dramatically darker and more intense on the nose, very clearly stating its rustic, Howell Mountain origins. Cigar box, charcoal and black currants on the nose. The texture is a step up in richness and concentration from the other Pilcrow Cabernets, but loses no grace, restraint and purity. A very long,...

Points **95**



Larkmead, Napa Valley, California, USA, 2018

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Very savoury and spice-laden on the nose, showing aromas of cigar box, chicory, sandalwood and redcurrants. The palate is beautifully multidimensional: deep but bright, weighty and forward but with great length and integration. A definitive showing of Calistoga, built for at least two decades in the cellar but will also...

Points **95**



Merryvale, Napa Valley, St Helena, California, USA, 2018

+ Add to My Wines

Black, dusty fruits and subtle new oak on the nose. Dark-fruited, punchy and spongy on the palate. The finish has a very upright posture, leaving off with a chalky dryness. Decidedly modern but beautifully proportioned. A relative bargain considering there are wines two-three times the price that deliver this plush...

Points **95**



Cardinale, Napa Valley, California, USA, 2018

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The perennial centerpiece wine from Jackson Family Wines and winemakers Chris Carpenter. Composed around mountain fruit with supporting roles from valley floor vineyards across the valley. Hedonistic and commanding on the nose, with dense aromas of ripe black currants, black cherries, coffee beans and fresh herbs. The palate is svelte,...

Points **95**



Turnbull, Black Label, Napa Valley, Oakville, 2018

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A selection of the best barrels of both the Fortuna and Leopoldinda sites. A blend is not always greater than the sum of its parts, but it is the case here. The nose is floral, woody, rustic and laden with black fruits. A luscious, simply delicious palate ends up in...

Points **95**



Sodaro, Estate Cabernet, Napa Valley, Coombsville, 2018

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Quintessentially Coombsville on the nose, which combines freshness with opulent black fruits, tying them together with a sturdy, graphite-laden core. Utterly seamless on the palate, with a voluptuousness texture tethered to a weightless, ethereal quality. The finish is long, multifaceted, and never stays in one place very long.

Points **95**



Dalla Valle Vineyards, Napa Valley, Oakville, 2018

+ Add to My Wines

A luscious, ripe but tucked-in expression of eastern Oakville Cabernet from Andy Erickson. The nose is voluptuous and chock full of ripe red and purple fruits surrounded by subtle toasted oak aromas. The palate is delectably sweet and concentrated, showing flavours of boysenberry, candied black cherries, fresh tobacco and brown...

Points **95**



Lokoya, Napa Valley, Diamond Mountain, California, USA, 2018

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Year in and year out, Lokoya provides a masterclass in crafting rugged mountain fruit into a svelte package, while always letting its essence come through. Their Diamond Mountain release is wonderfully perfumed and exuberant on the nose, with aromas of lilacs, fresh herbs and orchard blossoms. It is opulent and...

Points **95**



Corison, Sunbasket Vineyard, Napa Valley, St Helena, 2018

+ Add to My Wines

Acquired by Corison in 2015 after working with the fruit since the 1990s, the Sunbasket Vineyard is a 'stone's throw' away from the more well known Kronos site. The most succulent, juicy and spry wine of the Corison lineup. Red-fruited, energetic and beaming on the nose, with aromas of fresh...

Points **95**



Chimney Rock, Tomahawk Vineyard, Napa Valley, Stags Leap District, 2018

[+ Add to My Wines](#)

Planted in 2002, this site produces a wine more dark-fruited and lush than the Ganymede bottling. Aged in 75% new French oak. Blackcurrants, wet cedar and fennel on the nose. The texture of the palate is stunning, splitting the difference between plush, coating, lifted and graceful. Explosive on the finish,...

Points **95**



Chappellet, Pritchard Hill Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley, 2018

+ Add to My Wines

Sourced from the top 15-20% of Chappellet's holdings on Pritchard Hill. Floral aromas of fresh violets, damp herbs and black fruits. Powerful and muscular on the palate, but a lean, toned muscle. Often, the flagship wine of a Napa estate pulls out all the stops with ripeness, but this bottling...

Points **95**

Acumen, Peak Attelas, Napa Valley, Atlas Peak, 2018



Tasted by Matthew Luczy (at Los Angeles, 11 Oct 2020)

93

The more floral and understated of the two Acumen vineyard-designate Cabernets. Fresh violets, moss, and black plums on the nose. The palate balances a plush texture with polished tannins, clearly showing its mountain origins but doing so with restraint and poise.

Drinking Window 2024 – 2037

**Acumen, Peak, Napa Valley, Atlas Peak,
California, USA, 2018**



Tasted by Matthew Luczy (at Los Angeles, 11 Oct 2020)

92

A blend of the Attelas and Edcora sites, both of which are also bottled as vineyard-designates. Dark, bramble-driven aromas framed by oiled leather and coffee beans. Taught and angular on the palate with flavours of dried herbs, hard clay and cedar. The finish is gritty, focused and has good length.

Acumen, Peak Edcora, Napa Valley, Atlas Peak, 2018

Tasted by Matthew Luczy (at Los Angeles, 11 Oct 2020)

92

Roasted espresso, plum purée and graphite on the nose. The palate is spry and energetic with a good balance of red and black fruits. A coarse tannin structure leads to a long, dusty finish, stitching together a solid example of the Atlas Peak AVA.

Drinking Window 2024 - 2037