

FOOD // WINE OF THE WEEK

# Here are the best California Cabernets for \$20 or less right now

These 9 affordable bottles defy expectations for inexpensive Cabernet Sauvignon



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Esther Mobley's picks for the best California Cabernet Sauvignons for under \$20  
Esther Mobley / The Chronicle

Trying to find a good bottle of California wine for under \$20 can be tricky. But trying to find a good bottle of California Cabernet Sauvignon for that price is practically impossible.

All California wines, no matter the variety, face some tough economic realities. Hiring people, buying land and farming crops amid drought, wildfires and other forces of climate change — all those costs add up in the Golden State

On top of that, Cabernet Sauvignon, that red grape variety that reigns supreme in France's Bordeaux and our Napa Valley, is so popular and coveted that it tends to operate by an economic reality all its own.

Because Cabernet wines are so in demand, and because customers are willing to pay high prices for the bottles, the market for the grapes themselves has gone wild. In Napa County last year, for example, farmers sold their Cabernet grapes to winemakers for an average of \$6,500 a ton. We'd expect that to translate to a \$65 bottle of wine. That's average. (And, by the way, that's lower than what the average has been in Napa during the last few years; the anomalies of the 2020 vintage, marred by wildfire and smoke, reduced the grape pricing.)

That means that most quality-minded producers end up having to sell their Cabernets for higher prices, just because their own costs are high. Conversely, it also means that a lot of the inexpensive Cabs you see at the grocery store had to go to a lot of trouble to get their costs so low — and more often than not, it means they've compromised on quality, taking winemaking shortcuts.

Often, sub-\$20 Cabs taste as if they've been doctored with oak chips, a quick and cheap way to inject some toasty oak flavoring into a wine without having to actually put it into an expensive oak barrel. Their fruit flavors tend to be unpleasantly jammy, accented by some dense, unwelcome residual sugar.

I decided not to let those past experiences deter me, however. This month, I set out to taste as many sub-\$20 California Cabernet Sauvignons as I could. Inevitably, there were some

unimpressive bottlings — some were so sweet-tasting that I could barely stand to take a second sip. But there were also some delightful surprises. I was pleased to taste some balanced, expressive Cabs in a range of styles: some light and fresh, others rich and heady.

If you're the type of Cab drinker who likes a little bit of that minty, peppery, herbal note — compounds called pyrazines that are present in the grape tend to produce those flavors — then I'm sorry to say you won't find much of that here (with the possible exception of the J. Lohr Seven Oaks). While there are plenty of higher-end California Cabernets that embrace the grape's green-tasting side, these affordable bottlings seem to understand that their audience likely wants bolder, fruit-forward flavors.

Finally, a plea to all my Cab-loving readers: Look beyond Napa! Of course, Napa produces many awe-inspiring Cabernets, and I love to drink them. But if you're looking for friendly pricing, that's all but unobtainable in Napa Cab. (I'd consider a good Napa Cab for \$45 or \$50 to be a screaming bargain.) The highest-performing region in my recent Cabernet tastings was Paso Robles, in the Central Coast, where it's easier to make excellent wine at a lower cost. Many of the wines that made it into my list are sourced from vineyards in multiple wine regions throughout the state; in that case, the label identifies the wine simply as being from "California," without naming a sub-region.

Note: Each wine's price may vary by a few dollars depending on the retail outlet. Either way, these are all outstanding values.

**Hobo Cabernet Sauvignon Alexander Valley 2018 (\$20.99, 13%):** OK, this may be slightly over \$20 (at least at Flatiron, where I bought it), but the Hobo Wine Co. Cabernet Sauvignon may have been my favorite of this whole lot. Coming from one of Sonoma County's best Cabernet regions, it's a Syrah lover's Cab, wafting umamirich notes of porcini mushrooms and roasted

meat alongside a fragrant floral perfume. A forest-floor flavor — leaves, tree bark, wet earth — appears on the palate, accented by sharp acidity.

**J. Lohr Cabernet Sauvignon Seven Oaks Paso Robles 2019 (\$17, 13.9%):** The Seven Oaks Cab was among the more savory wines in this tasting. It subtly hints at some of those green-herb notes that the grape variety can express, like dried oregano, mint and bay leaf. A black pepper flavor shines through, accented by grainy tannins.

**Cannonball Cabernet Sauvignon California 2018 (\$15, 13.5%):** This wine passes for a much more expensive Cabernet, with a nose that gives off many of the concentrated fruit aromas you'll find in pricier Napa bottlings: cedar, sandalwood, blueberry, blackberry. The wine feels lighter on the palate than the flavors would suggest; it's lively, not too weighty

**Grounded Cabernet Sauvignon California 2019 (\$15, 14.1%):** This extremely aromatic Cabernet smells like raspberry jam and cherry candy. Woodsy, vanilla laden flavors gently frame a generous core of fruit, which tastes bold and expressive without going overboard.

**Broadside Cabernet Sauvignon Paso Robles 2018 (\$13, 13.5%):** Freshly ground coffee beans and figs come through when I smell this wine, which carries substantial fruit flavors within a relatively slight body. It goes down smooth: not too much tannin, not too much acid.

**Wente Cabernet Sauvignon Southern Hills Livermore Valley 2019 (\$14, 13.5%):** A cinnamon scent wafts from this potent wine, which delivers flavors of Medjool dates, blackberry jam and toasty oak. Its tannins are more prominent than in some of the other wines here, making it a good choice to for drinking alongside a fatty piece of red meat.

**Ancient Peaks Cabernet Sauvignon Paso Robles Santa Margarita Ranch 2019 (\$15, 14.8%):** One of the denser wines in the bunch, the Ancient Peaks Cabernet tastes like mocha and blueberry preserves. Some firm tannins cut through the wine's rich texture. Anyone who enjoys

Cabs in a big, bold style will find this pleasant — and the fact that it comes from a single vineyard, rather than a multiregional blend, is added value.

**The Fableist Cabernet Sauvignon “373” Paso Robles 2020 (\$19, 13.9%):** The aroma here is a ringer for cherry Jolly Ranchers. It’s big on ripe, mixed-berry flavor, with warming vanilla tones and spicy, cedar-inflected tannin.

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