

# WINE ENTHUSIAST®

## Why Oakville's Luxurious Napa Cabernets Still Reign Supreme

*Oakville, arguably the center of Napa's winemaking scene, could be credited with putting California Cabernet Sauvignon on the map. But in a constantly changing wine world, can this storied region still hold its own?*

BY VIRGINIE BOONE



*Lambs among the vines at Rudd Vineyards*

In the heart of the Napa Valley, Oakville is the go-to address for California Cabernet Sauvignon, where the top producers of luxury wines tend their vines. It's home to giants like Harlan Estate, **Far Niente**, Dalla Valle, Robert Mondavi, Opus One, Groth, Rudd, PlumpJack Winery and Screaming Eagle, to name a mighty few.

Famous vineyard sites are no less epic, from To Kalon to Martha's Vineyard, Vine Hill Ranch, Oakville Ranch, Bonny's Vineyard and Money Road Ranch. The grapes from the appellation cost an average of \$10,000 per ton.

"There's good air movement here and abundant sunshine," says Cameron Parry, director of winegrowing at Groth. "You get red and black fruit, plush, soft tannins—it's a beautiful tipping point on so many levels."

It was the amazing Martha's Vineyard that became the first vineyard designate in California in 1966, courtesy of Heitz Cellars. Heitz continues to make a Martha's Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon to this day.

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That was the same year Robert Mondavi built his iconic winery on To Kalon Vineyard, the valley's first such operation to open after Prohibition. About a decade later, **Far Niente** and Opus One would both open their doors, the latter a historic joint venture with Baron Philippe de Rothschild of Bordeaux and Mondavi. Groth would soon follow, in 1981, buying vineyards planted by Silver Oak co-founder Justin Meyer.

It would be Groth's 1985 Reserve Cab that would capture record-setting scores in most wine publications. That same year, Bill Harlan started to plant an estate vineyard on the western edge of the appellation, releasing the first Harlan wine in 1996 from the 1990 vintage.

The Dalla Valle 1992 Maya, named for founder Naoko Dalla Valle's daughter, was also released to critical acclaim. Dalla Valle Vineyards was formed in 1982 on the eastern edge of Oakville, just below Pritchard Hill, and released their first wine in 1986. Set on a westward-facing, mineral-rich hillside, it consists of 18 distinctive blocks with 14 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon, six acres Cabernet Franc and half an acre of Petit Verdot.

Acclaim for Oakville continued. At the Napa Valley Wine Auction held in 2000, a 1992 six-liter of Screaming Eagle sold for \$500,000, an eye-opening record that would draw more attention and desire for Oakville-grown Cabernet.

Many of these remarkable wines were made before Oakville even became an appellation in 1993. The new American Viticultural Area was established just north of Washington Street in Yountville at Highway 29 and extends two miles up to Skellenger Lane. It ranges from 500 feet in elevation in the western Mayacamas to 1,006 feet up the eastern Vaca Range.

Fleshy and expansive in tannin, Oakville Cabs typically brim with soft, supple fruit, black cherry, cassis and even cherry cordial, as well as crushed stone, flint and freshly tilled earth, especially from the wines that come from the hillsides.

Here are recommended bottlings that show why Oakville is still at the top of its game.

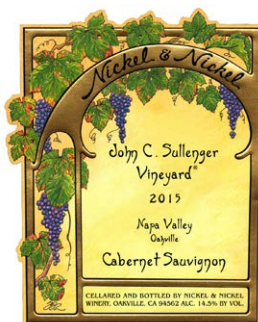
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## Recommended Oakville Cabernet Sauvignon



**95 Far Niente 2015 Estate Bottled Cabernet Sauvignon (Oakville).** Just a dash of Petit Verdot is added to this wine, with the Cabernet Sauvignon coming from the Martin Stelling Vineyard that stands regally behind the winery. This starts off with soft aromas of cassis and red cherry, which appear on the palate that's built by sizable tannins and texture. The richness is defined in dark chocolate, with just enough acidity to keep the mouthfeel succulent and lush. *Editors' Choice.* —V.B.



**90 Nickel & Nickel 2015 John C. Sullenger Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon (Oakville).** This is a high-toned wine from a site in the heart of the appellation. Dried herb and tobacco show up on the nose, with a hint of black olive. The densely packed flavors of dark cherry and black licorice lean into rich, supportive tannins and a lush finish. —V.B.