

Through the Grapevine/ Top 10 Wines of 2018 by Tim Dwight

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Christmas and the year's end bring many happy memories and an opportunity to reflect upon a list of memorable wines from the past 12 months. It's also time to choose a select few for our annual Top 10 listing.

Most all of what follows should still have some availability in the retail and restaurant world although inventories may prove fleeting as we go forward into 2019. This year's Top 10 features wines from the high 'teens up to a retail ceiling of about \$50 and represent selections from Napa, Sonoma and Oregon as well as France, Italy and Spain.

Here's to hoping that Santa drops something special into your stocking tomorrow night.

#1 Wine-of-the-Year: Faust 2016 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon

The '16 vintage has begun to show up in the market and it's an across the boards winner in Napa. Proprietor Agustin Huneeus started in the wine business in Chile with Concha Y Toro, sold that and moved on to Napa where his family is in charge at Quintessa, Flowers and Faust. The Faust '16 is not inexpensive but brings an opportunity to taste Napa cab at it's best.

Full-bodied, rich and concentrated with black fruit notes of plums, blackberries and cassis, the length and tenacity long and admirable. Tannins are well-integrated and soft, allowing the wine to open up with a little aeration. Notes of baked spices and vanilla from French oak aging lend grace and elegance. (Approximate retail \$46)

#2/ Caparzo 2013 Brunello di Montalcino, Tuscany, Italy

Bottlings from Brunello generally reach the market 4 or 5 years after the vintage due to aging requirements mandated from the Italian DOCG wine authorities. That's a perfect amount of time to allow these red wines from the sangiovese grape to enter into a period of drinkability. The '13's can age for another 5-10 years easily, though this one from the esteemed Caparzo winery can be enjoyed now. Medium-bodied, with red fruit notes of cherry and strawberries along with some earthiness and tobacco leaf. A touch of food-friendly acidity keeps the wine lively and balanced. (\$38)

#3/ Grgich Hills 2014 Chardonnay 40th Anniversary, Napa

Over four decades ago a young winemaker named Mike Grgich crafted the Napa chardonnay that bested the French competition at the famed Judgment of Paris tasting. Grgich has long departed from Chateau Montelena and been on his own with his eponymously named winery. This special bottling—and it's likely the hardest to find on our list—is Grgich's 40th anniversary tribute to that image-setting event. Farmed from a cool climate site in Carneros, this organically produced chard comes without added yeast during fermentation, keeping the flavors delicate and lively. Memorable and exotic with it's spiced notes of baked pears, lemon custard, orange peel and a deft touch of new oak; simply the best domestic chardonnay I've had all year. (\$52)

#4/ Chateau Grand Pontet 2015, St. Emilion, Bordeaux

Another “best of recent vintages” is the 2015s from Bordeaux. Wines from St. Emilion on the “right bank” are merlot-dominant with smaller proportions of cabernet franc. They may not age as long as some of the sauvignons but what we're looking for here is something we can enjoy now. Grand Pontet represents a consistent value and the 2015 has scored in the low-to-mid-90s from most all the wine publications. Medium-to-full bodied with notes of blackberries, blueberries and approachable oak tannins. (\$39)

#5/ Chalk Hill Estate 2015 Red Wine, Sonoma

Unmistakably Californian in style, the Chalk Hill is large-scaled and packed with ripe fruit, big oak and pleasing jaminess. Chalk Hill was purchased by Bill Foley and is now one of the crowning jewels of his Foley Family portfolio. Daughter Courtney has been installed as winemaker and that's proven a sage move as testimonial with this plush red blend dominated by cabernet sauvignon. (\$49)

#6/ Resonance 2016 Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley

Our Top 10 pinot noir comes from Oregon with a French accent. Resonance is a new project from Burgundy's venerable Louis Jadot and long-time Beaune winemaker Jacques Lardiere has come out of retirement for the opportunity to craft their first offerings. As one might expect, this pinot is light and lithe with good structure; red raspberry and notes of tea and dried herbs add depth and dimension. (\$31)

#7/ Domaine Vacheron Sancerre, Loire Valley

In his new wine book, “The Sommelier’s Atlas of Taste”, California vintner, Master Somm and author Raj Parr wrote, “In Sancerre, there’s Vacheron and then there’s everyone else.” A fitting comment perhaps for a wine style that’s ubiquitous in cafes and restaurants throughout the western world. I’d posit that even hardcore aficionado’s would be hard pressed to name names in regards to Sancerre. Vacheron’s 2015 is remarkable full-bodied for a sauvignon blanc, with notes of lemon, mangoes and smoke. This elegant offering is ripe, round and a perfect pairing with seafood of all sorts. (\$30)

#8/ Masseria Setteport 2015 Etna Rosso, Sicily

Wines from vines growing on the volcanic slopes of Mt. Etna are all the critic’s darlings right now. Reds are a little more successful than whites, and nerello mascalese is the shining star. With a flavor profile that’s a theoretically cross between pinot noir and, say, barbera, nerello combines red fruit notes of cherries and raspberries along with hints of sage and rosemary. Some notable acidity keeps this red compact and lively. (\$19)

#9/ Bodegas Volver 2014 Triga, Alicante, Spain

Alicante is a coastal region in southeastern Spain; monastrell (or mourvedre in France) is the mainstay red varietal. Unrelenting sunshine bakes the vines pretty much all year long producing a full-bodied (and 15+% alcohol) behemoth. Spicy and generously oaked, notes of rich, ripe black fruits predominate, making this an interesting choice with barbeque—or even a flourless chocolate torte. (\$40)

#10/ Terrunyo 2017 Sauvignon Blanc, Chile

One of Chile’s largest wineries is Concha Y Toro. Like other operations of its size, they produce a plethora of wine ranging from grocery store plonk to higher-end offerings. The Terrunyo caught my attention when one wine publication named it as “the best New World sauvignon blanc”. Eschewing the tropical grapefruit style of New Zealand and the mineral smokiness of most French offerings, this Chilean emphasizes penetrating grassy and fresh herbal notes. Think chicken and seafood dishes with cream sauce for an apt pairing. (\$18)