

## Exploring the Cabernet Sauvignon Of Napa Valley, Part Four: Calistoga, Oak Knoll District, And Coombsville

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Even within the relatively narrow confines of Napa Valley—around five miles at its widest point, and just 30 miles north to south—there is a serious range of climatic differences that impact the various AVAs within it. Which is why in today’s installment of my series on Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon between 2016 and 2018, I’ll be looking at three appellations that in many senses bracket the ways in which temperature variation impacts the wines that come from them.

Calistoga, for example, is located at the uppermost reaches of Napa Valley, which would seem to imply that it’s cooler than other appellations. That, after all, tends to be the received wisdom in the Northern Hemisphere—that the further south you go, the temperatures get warmer, just as temperatures cool further north. But that logic fails to take into consideration other issues of geography and micro-climate, and in the case of Calistoga, “The heat we experience in the summer is tremendous compared to the rest of the valley,” explained Chris Kenefick, Vice President of Sales at Kenefick Ranch. “While we do have cool nights from the air coming up from the [Pacific] Ocean via the Russian River, our part of the valley is so narrow that it really traps the daytime heat. This helps the fruit to reach optimal ripeness that really shows some intense flavors. Just the way we like it in Calistoga.”

Matt Crafton, Winemaker at Chateau Montelena, agrees—and also notes that Calistoga has the ability to produce wines that boast a real sense of elegance alongside their telltale ripeness. “Calistoga combines the best of the mountain appellations in Napa with those on the valley floor,” he explained. “Put another way, the rocky, well-drained soils, rugged terrain, and sun-soaked aspects drive ripeness and concentration in our wines. But the modest elevation, from 300 to 1200 feet above sea level, along with plentiful cooling from the Russian River drainage and Mt. Saint Helena, encourage ample acidity, which is why our wines are so long-lived. Experiencing ripeness and refinement can be a rarity when one tastes through Napa Valley Cabernet. But Calistoga offers the opportunity to accomplish both, which has become a hallmark of Montelena over the last 40 years.”



The iconic Chateau Montelena, in the Calistoga AVA of Napa Valley.

For a taste of that richness of character, coupled with refinement, I recommend the following two wines from Calistoga, listed alphabetically:

## **Chateau Montelena Estate Cabernet Sauvignon 2017 Calistoga**

A pure beam of cherries and mountain berries leap from the glass, where they are joined by cherry liqueur and pomegranate syrup: The fruit here is gorgeous. On the palate, that ripeness is cut through with excellent acidity. This is such a classically styled, precise Cabernet Sauvignon, and pipe tobacco, allspice, and pepper, as well as flecks of fresh-picked thyme and rosemary joined by the suggestion of wild strawberries, make this wonderful already and capable of aging gracefully for another decade-plus.

## **Kenefick Ranch “Chris’s Cuvée” Cabernet Sauvignon 2016 Calistoga**

From the West Palisade Range, this dense, generous Cab is flecked with dried thyme and fresh sage aromas, as well as chocolate and cherries, before a palate of sweet plums and blackberries, vanilla crème brûlée, cafe mocha, and brambly berries spiced up with cloves and jerk seasoning. Plum sauce and toffee pudding linger through the sweet-souled finish.

At the other end of Napa Valley are Oak Knoll District and Coombsville, both of which benefit from very different geographical and geological situations. Jon Ruel, CEO of Trefethen Family Vineyards, explained that, “Because we are closer to the marine influence from the San Pablo Bay and the Pacific Ocean, our vineyard stays cooler than locations further up the Napa Valley. This extends our growing season, allowing for fantastic flavor development as the grapes take longer to reach maturity.” He added, “As for our Cabernet Sauvignon in particular, we are very much on the cool end of vineyard temperatures for this variety and therefore our resulting wines feature a signature brightness on the palate.”



Trefethen Family Vineyards, in the Oak Knoll District of Napa Valley.

### **TREFETHEN FAMILY VINEYARDS**

To experience that character, it’s well worth looking for these two excellent Cabs, listed alphabetically. And while the Black Stallion Gaspare Vineyard is a full degree of alcohol higher than the Trefethen, both of them are exceptionally appealing and balanced.

## **Trefethen Family Vineyards Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon 2016 Oak Knoll District**

This estate-grown Cabernet overflows with plump, ripe fruit on the nose and palate, a wave of wild strawberries, cherries, purple plums, and red currants that are layered with fresh-grated cinnamon stick and the suggestion of something vaguely balsamic. It’s all framed by sweet tannins and finishes with a hint of raspberry-filled dark chocolate bonbons.

## **Black Stallion Estate Gaspare Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon 2018 Oak Knoll District**

Dense and enrobed in chocolate on the nose, with blueberries, fig Newtons, and espresso beans joined by cassis, all of which tee up a palate of richness and breadth, with blackberries, black-cherry liqueur, warm licorice, and fresh-ground cloves—which seem to grow on the finish—wrapping up with a dusting of cinnamon and a slab of cedar, cut through with pencil-led minerality. Drink this now with grilled strip steak or hold onto it until the mid-2030s.

Coombsville, located to the southeast of Oak Knoll District, benefits from “volcanic soils, cooling bay breeze, and [a] long ripening season [that] result in a Cabernet Sauvignon with distinct minerality, supple mouthfeel, and a strikingly textural component to their tannins,” according to Jen Beloz, Estate Director at Faust.

The Coombsville AVA website elaborates: “Coombsville weather is moderated by its proximity to the San Pablo Bay. Frosts are mitigated, fog covers settle more frequently and burn off later in the day than our neighbors to the North. The vines bud early and the grapes tend to be harvested later, making for a long, slow ripening period. Daily average high temperatures can be as much as ten degrees cooler during the hot months than most other appellations, and heatspikes tend to be less severe. All of this limits dehydration, preserves acidity levels, and generally aids even ripening patterns.”



Faust's vineyards showcase the rolling landscape of Coombsville.

Coombsville only recently gained AVA status, in 2011, but in that short decade, it has gained a well-deserved reputation for excellence. Check out these three wines, listed alphabetically, for a taste of why Coombsville is generating so much buzz.

## **Ackerman Family Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon 2017 Coombsville**

So well-detailed as soon as you sniff this, with minerality cutting through sage and lime zest, unexpectedly enough, alongside cranberries and pomegranate seeds. On the palate, this is structured and still in its youth, yet without the overt primary fruit you'd expect. Flavors of espresso beans and cocoa powder dust the tongue, and frame notes of forest floor and golden chanterelles seasoned with just-picked thyme. Power, elegance, and an herbal lift set this apart.

## **Faust “The Pact” Cabernet Sauvignon 2018 Coombsville**

The oak is still absorbing, but even now this is a toasty, impressive wine aromatically, with spice cake flecked with cardamom and plum pudding with a dusting of cracked black peppercorn, all before a rich, silky palate energized with acidity that amps up flavors of blueberries, purple plums, mountain berries, green peppercorns, cedar, and pencil led, finishing with a hint of Fernet Branca, cafe mocha, and orange oils. Give it a few years to fully express its potential, and then drink it though the late-2030s.

## **Silverado Vineyards GEO Cabernet Sauvignon 2016 Coombsville**

There's an almost crunchy sense of minerality to the nose here, which lends a distinctly savory edge to the brambly berries, cigar humidor, and violets. This is a wine that is built for the cellar, with tannins structuring a palate that speaks of black raspberries, Amarena cherries, and savory minerality coming back on the finish. This will be able to age for two decades or more.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/brianfreedman/2021/04/23/exploring-the-cabernet-sauvignon-of-napa-valley-part-four-calistoga-oak-knoll-district-and-coombsville/?sh=1f70a4dd56f7>