

2023 Monterey International Wine Competition Platinum Award Winner Reviews

Director Rich Cook's reviews of each of our Platinum Award winners – listed here in alphabetical order by brand name - offer a little more insight as to what exactly makes these wines worth seeking out. As an independent evaluator, the scores listed here are his alone and may differ from the score awarded by the judges.

Barefoot (California) Red Moscato NV (\$7)

Step one: procure a bottle of this. Step Two: Make a pound cake. Step Three: Add berries and whipped cream. Step Four: Pour a glass and also pour some on the pound cake creation. Step Five: Enjoy! **90**

Barefoot Bubbly (California) Pink Moscato NV (\$10)

There's more here than meets the eye – meaning that this isn't just for limos full of bachelorette party celebrants. Think of it as a lightly spiked strawberry spritzer with some weight to it, and you'll start to see the pairing possibilities. It works with salted buttered popcorn quite nicely, among other things... **91**

Black Girl Magic (California) Riesling 2021 (\$20)

Yes, it's well documented that I love Riesling in its many forms, and this wine makes my list in the medium sweet zone with pulsating acidity that makes the sugar seem appropriate and allows pure Riesling flavors to shine. Magic? Winemaker Amy Butler would tell you it's not magic – just attention to detail and a solid fruit source that gets the job done. Amy gets the job done with a flourish! **92**

Carol Shelton, Alexander Valley (Sonoma County, California) Carignane Oat Valley Vineyard "Wireless" 2019 (\$30)

I always appreciate this wine, even though it can be wildly different each year, because the winemaker takes care to let the vintage speak. This offering is on the ripe and rich side of the spectrum, with brambly fruit, mild pepper, fall spice and a dash of vanilla playing well together and finishing bright and fresh. If you want to upgrade your weekend burger experience, this is a good way to go. **94**

Carol Shelton, Central Coast (California) Red Wine "Coquille Rouge" 2021 (\$28)

This bottle continues its success with the 2021 vintage, and it shows Carol's talent as a master blender. This time around, it's equal parts Mourvedre, Grenache Noir, Carignane and Petite Sirah, with some Alicante Bouschet and a dash of Viognier rounding things out – figuratively and literally. It presents on the bright side of the Rhone – think Cote Rotie with flash. Brava! **94**

Carol Shelton, Sonoma County (California) Zinfandel Late Harvest "Black Magic" 2021 (\$20)

When you want a little something sweet, but not too sweet, that shows a little depth and character, reach for this bottle and some medium to strong cheese and enjoy a sweet and savory dessert. This has plenty of Zin character, and preserves the pepper prized by Zin lovers while offering a bit of sweet jammy goodness. Always enjoyable! **92**

Cellar 426 (No Appellation) White Wine “Snowbound” NV (\$17)

If you're snowbound whether in Nebraska or Los Angeles County (!) this wine will have you feeling like summer in no time. Brianna is the variety, and this is the ripeness spot where it seems to work best. White flower and stonefruit aromas lead to a crisp, semi sweet palate that delivers peach and sweet lemon, with a signature foxy note that adds to the fun. If you can find it, don't miss it! **92**

Cinquain Cellars, Paso Robles (California) Red Wine “Independence Red” Nagengast Estate Vineyard 2020 (\$40)

Bordeaux inspired blends are prevalent in California for obvious reasons, and a few manage to tip their hat a little more forcefully in the French direction, as this wine does. It captures the earth to fruit balance beautifully while still managing to announce its Paso Robles roots. This is built for your finest fare, and it's offered at a bargain price for its quality level. Don't miss this! **95**

Cooper & Thief (California) Red Wine Blend “Bourbon Barrel Aged” 2021 (\$30)

So, as an admitted non-fan of this category, I'm pleasantly surprised by this wine and it's melding of bourbon character into the red wine in a way that the desert possibilities it presents make it a viable option. If you're looking to add a little twist to the proceedings, serve this with some stilton to tame the woody character of the finish. It's always worth trying something new... **91**

CRU Winery, Santa Lucia Highlands (Monterey County, California) Pinot Noir Smith & Lindley Vineyard 2021 (\$25)

CRU recently moved into this site – the former Paraiso Springs – and is off to the races with the estate fruit. The tart, fresh side of Pinot gets the nod here, with brushy dry earth notes alongside strawberry and tart cherry fruit. There's some oak that's still folding in here, but a couple of years in your cellar will smooth the edges and evolve this into a real beauty. Nicely realized Pinot Noir with a sense of place. **93**

Diosa, Monterey (California) Chardonnay “La Splendeur di Soliel” 2021 (\$20)

A fabulous value in a rich, flavorful Chardonnay that hails from the banks of the Salinas River just south of King City. It leans into the tropical side of the variety, showing passion fruit and mango aromas and flavors, tempered by lemon crème and just the right acidity to keep things crisp and creamy. Winemaker James Ewart has really dialed this bottling in, and the low price is a big bonus. **94**

Francis Ford Coppola Director's Cut, Alexander Valley (Sonoma County, California) Cabernet Sauvignon 2019 (\$34)

The bottle with the zoetrope strikes again with classic Alexander Valley profile that leans to the darker side of the regional spectrum. It succeeds with rich brown spice joining the blackberry and black currant fruit, and they linger together through the finish, where the spice tones lean forward a little bit. Serve this with rich beef dishes or medium strength cheese. **92**

Furthermore Wines, Santa Lucia Highlands (Monterey County, California) Pinot Noir Rosella's Vineyard 2019 (\$60)

This shows the elegant side of what Rosella's Vineyard has to offer, with dry earth notes joining strawberry, cherry and rhubarb in both the aroma and flavor profiles. Everything is beautifully knit together from start to finish, with vibrant acidity promising a long life ahead. If you can't wait, pair this with the fish or fowl side of the menu, and you don't need to shy away from a saucy preparation. **97**

J. Lohr, El Pomar District (Paso Robles, California) Malbec Shotwell Vineyard 2019 (\$60)

Wow! There's boldy structured wine, and then there are wines like this one that are built for serious cellar time. Full throttle extraction gets all the tannin action going, but it's all skin tannin – no seedy, woody or stemmy edges are evident, which means “tuck me away in a dark corner so as to discover me unexpectedly in the future and marvel at what time can do.” Or, decant for a day and serve with something boldly beefy. **94**

J. Lohr, Arroyo Seco (Monterey County, California) Valdiguie “Wildflower” 2022 (\$13)

Welcome to the continuing saga of an unheralded (not by me) inexpensive beauty, one that delivers a little more weight in 2022 than the last couple of vintages. That said, it's not heavy at all, showing the same liveliness that fans expect. This has turkey dinner written all over it, but you can open it when you start grilling burgers and you might have some left y the time the meat is ready to eat. Once again, Bravo! P.S. I just opened a 2017 vintage, and it is still showing beautifully. **94**

J Vineyards, Russian River Valley (Sonoma County, California) Sparkling Wine “Cuvee 20” NV (\$38)

House style and consistency are the hallmarks of any long standing non-vintage sparkler, and the “Cuvee 20” delivers on both counts. Of course, this only matters if it's good, which this wine has been consistently since its first iteration. Apple, pear, soft brioche notes and a zesty fresh finish are delightful, delicious and dependable. Here's to what's now become a legacy. **94**

J Vineyards, Russian River Valley (Sonoma County, California) Brut Rosé NV (\$45)

It's much more difficult to have a consistent non-vintage sparkling Rosé than to attain the feat with its white counterparts, and I don't know that consistency has been the target when it comes to this bottle. This batch is very pleasant, with lively strawberry and citrus, a touch of starchy character and a clean, zesty finish. When you need pink fizz, you can't go wrong with J, though the batches do vary. **93**

J Vineyards, Russian River Valley (Sonoma County, California) Pinot Noir 2021 (\$25)

This brand-new release showcases both a classic Russian River cherry cola profile and the extra energy boost that the 2021 vintage is going to become famous for. There's an acidic drive to this that allows the winemaker a little freedom to utilize oak profiles to enhance without trampling on the fruit character. Complexity is the name of the game here, delivered at a price that seems ridiculously low. Kudos to Nicole Hitchcock and her team! **94**

Jeff Runquist, Amador County (California) Barbera 2021 (\$28)

If you're a fan of clove and fall spice, this bottle will push all your buttons in a good way. Tart black cherry and blackberry get the full spice treatment, and the acidity keeps any one aspect from dominating. Mr. Runquist seems to have unlocked the formula for achieving this kind of balance, as his trophy case continues to testify. Go beefy here – you won't regret it. **93**

Jeff Runquist, Amador County (California) Barbera Cooper Vineyard 2021 (\$34)

Runquist has been sourcing this famed site for Barbera for several years running, and it's always worth a look. It's distinctly different than the other two Barbera offerings in his stable, with a more taut acid profile, reined in spice and age-worthy structure. Mixed berry fruit is fresh and lively, and the fall spice notes dance between the berries with intriguing tension. Great stuff! **94**

Jeff Runquist, Clarksburg (Yolo County, California) Cabernet Franc Salman Vineyard 2021 (\$28)

Bursting with varietal character, this Cabernet Franc shows another facet of Jeff Runquist as a winemaker. Here he exerts minimal "house influence" and lets the wine sing its own song – a soaring melody of cherry, dried herbs, and gentle oak spice that ride freshening acidity through a long finish. It's fully integrated already and will continue to gain complexity over the next few years. This is a great addition to an already amazing lineup. **95**

Jeff Runquist, Paso Robles (California) Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve Three Way Vineyard 2020 (\$52)

The Runquist stamp is evident here, yet the wine clearly speaks of its Paso Robles provenance. Bold fruit character gets a boost from barrels that impart both spice and structure, and there's great finish push that maintains the layers of flavor seamlessly. Any Paso area winery would be proud to pour this, and I'm sure Runquist is more than proud pouring it at the Plymouth tasting room. **95**

Jeff Runquist, Amador County (California) Carignane Aparicio Vineyard 2021 (\$32)

This bottling shows the bright raisin-y aspect of the variety, but don't let that make you think that it's going to be too sweet. Imagine a raisin with no sugar left in it and add just a dash of pepper and you'll get the gist of what Mr. Runquist has going on here. Pro tip – take an ounce or two of this and stir it into a nice blue cheese to make a spreadable treat. **93**

Jeff Runquist, River Junction (San Joaquin County, California) Muscat Canelli 2022 (\$19)

Once again, a fine hommage to Moscato d'Asti – light, fresh, slightly fizzy and full-flavored fun in a glass. Bright tangerine and spice carry the day here, and it's a day you'll enjoy, whether as a stand-alone dessert or fresh fruit accompaniment. I'm guessing Jeff wishes he could make more of this... **92**

Jeff Runquist, Amador County (California) Rosé of Sangiovese 2022 (\$24)

The soft and subtle side of Rosé comes across initially, followed by a bold push of flavor in the finish, where strawberry, lemon and bay leaf dance together in dry style. Poolside, fried chicken, green salads – you make the call. **92**

Jeff Runquist, Jahant District (Lodi, California) Tempranillo Liberty Oaks Vineyard 2021 (\$30)
Markus Bokisch grows the fruit for this selection, and Jeff Runquist puts his signature spice on it without smothering the pretty Tempranillo character. Berry and cherry fruit play well of the spice mix, and a citric kiss in the finish waters the mouth and will complement lighter pork or beef dishes with style. Jeff's nose for sources continues to amaze... **92**

La Perdignus, Edna Valley (Central Coast, California) Albariño "Morro View" 2022 Russian River Valley (Sonoma County, California) Pinot Noir 2021 (\$22)

The name is Latin for "Very Worthy" and I'll agree that this wine qualifies – sourced from a vineyard near the better-known Paragon Vineyard where Albariño took its early toehold in California. Lemon oil aromatics kick things off, and they follow through on the palate in a wine that's refreshing and long. Well done! **92**

Macchia, Amador County (California) Barbera Cooper Ranch "Infamous" 2021 (\$28)

Infamous: sometimes defined as being well known for all the wrong reasons, sometimes defined as wicked or abominable. Interesting that this wine carries the name, since everything seems to be working in its favor – even the extreme ripeness level. Wines like this have fans for a reason, their jammy character seducing them into bliss. Here, you get more than just jam – there's fine-tuned spice and a citric finish that keeps the wine light on its feet. I'd go with the stinky cheese here... **93**

Macchia, Lodi (California) Primitivo Vista Luna Vineyard "Meticulous" 2021 (\$28)

This aptly named bottle looks to allow the vineyard to speak with a clear voice, with earthy notes joining the wild berry and pepper you expect from Zinfandel – Italian clone or not. There's no evident heat, and a little citrus on the finish keeps the berry fruit lively through a long, layered finish. Meticulous indeed! **95**

Macchia, Lodi (California) Zinfandel Old Vine "Superlicious" 2021 (\$35)

The great thing about wineries that offer several different bottlings of Zinfandel is their ability to showcase the versatility of the grape. This offering shows the bombastic, juicy side of Zin – one that fans adore for its fruit forward simplicity and its willingness to show a little heat in the finish. Serve with fire breathing foods – complement rather than contrast will serve this best. **92**

McBride Sisters Collection, Santa Lucia Highlands (Monterey County, California) Pinot Noir Reserve "Cocky Motherf*&ker" (\$70)

Give this a good decant before serving to let a little reductive note blow off – you'll be glad you did as it will expose a deep, structured wine that combines back cherry, damp and dry earth minerality and carefully woven oak spice into a satisfying package that will continue to evolve in the cellar. Winemaker Amy Butler knows her stuff, and while she isn't necessarily known for Pinot Noir, this is a home run. Think of the proprietary name in the Miles Davis sense... **95**

Navarro Vineyards, Anderson Valley (Mendocino County, California) Rosé of Pinot Noir 2022 (\$25)

You might say that twenty-five dollars is a little spendy for Rosé – until you taste this wine and realize that there's plenty of bang for your buck. This is often my favorite Rosé of the vintage, and while we'll see what happens as the 2022's come out, this bottle has taken the early lead. A soft entry quickly turns zesty, with strawberry, watermelon and Meyer lemon fruit getting a boost from a little bay leaf note. Flavors linger, and a little grip extends things nicely. It'll brighten your day! **93**

Nello Olivo, El Dorado (Sierra Foothills, California) Sagrantino 2020 (\$79)

This outfit has been nailing Cali Sagrantino for some time now, and if it's a variety that's new to you, it's a fabulous introduction. Known as a tannic beast of a wine, Nello's team manages to tame the beast without quashing its wild side. The tannins are here, but they're so well managed that the fruit's attractive qualities are already singing. Kudos to the winery for remaining committed to the variety and improving with each vintage. **95**

Nello Olivo, El Dorado (Sierra Foothills, California) Barbera 2020 (\$34)

Yes, 2020 will be remembered for fires that wiped a good portion of the red wine from California off the map, but intrepid aficionados know that there are always exceptions in any vintage that are worth seeking out. That's the case here, brought forth in a sadly underappreciated variety by the folks at Nello Olivo. It's made in a lusty style but still shows restraint and poise, with a characteristic freshness that keeps things fun throughout. It's got age-worthy structure as well. Perfectly ripe, and perfectly delicious. **95**

Noble Vines, Monterey County (California) Pinot Grigio "152" 2022 (\$12)

Pinot Grigio with real character can be a hard find, particularly when it comes to domestic offerings. That fact makes this bottle a real find, and at a value price. Stonefruit, apple and citrus are really firing on all cylinders here, and the finish begs another sip. It's widely available and poised to become your house white. **92**

Pelio Vineyards, Monterey (California) Chardonnay 2018 (\$35)

A new producer to me, and one you can bet I'll be looking more closely at them after tasting this wine. They have vineyards located near Talbott's Diamond T Vineyard, and that same kind of excellent quality shows here. Of course that takes a winemaking philosophy that allows site to shine, and that's also on full display as well. Taut, bright, easy on the oak - my kind of Chardonnay... **95**

Prophecy (California) Rosé 2022 (\$12)

This bottle switches appellations for 2022, moving from France to California, and the bright fresh fun with a dash of residual sugar is clearly shooting at a target. I'm a huge fan of products like this that can start a person on their journey into top quality wines – Bravo! **91**

V. Sattui, North Coast (California) Brut Rosé "Prestige Cuvee" 2018 (\$50)

Here's a sparkling Rosé that has me rethinking my thought that sparkling Rosé tends to be inferior to its non-pink counterparts. This is serious bubbly, with layered flavors, racy acidity and a zesty bright finish that has just a touch of grip that works in its favor, giving the strawberry lemon mix real staying power. I'm a big fan! **95**

V. Sattui, Napa Valley (California) Cabernet Sauvignon "Terra Forza" 2018 (\$45)

This seems to have been wisely held back for release – it seems to just now be starting to peek out from behind a fairly rigid structure and give a glimpse of what is to come. Blackberry, cassis, dried herbs and layered oak spice are in there, but you'll want to hold this for a while longer, or decant a good half day before serving if you go in early. **93**

V. Sattui, Los Carneros (Napa Valley, California) Chardonnay 2021 (\$45)

While better known for their red wine portfolio, this group is no slouch when it comes to the lighter side of the color spectrum. This Chardonnay is rich and textured without getting overtly oaky or buttery, finishing long and carrying the baked pear and apple flavors into the distance. It's a beautifully realized higher end crowd pleaser. **94**

V. Sattui, Russian River Valley (Sonoma County, California) Chardonnay "Collina d'Oro" 2021 (\$52)

This bottle offers a cool climate alternative to the winery's Napa Valley offerings, and each year that's it's been included it's a welcome addition, focusing on bright fruit - apple, stonefruit and a light tropical note all fold together and finish long. It's an appreciated stylistic departure from the more classically styled Chardonnays on the tasting room list, and it's often a fan favorite in the line-up - I suspect this will keep the string going. **94**

V. Sattui, Napa Valley (California) Red Wine "Paradiso" 2019 (\$110)

This is my first look at this vintage of Sattui's tribute to Bordeaux, and it's already making my favorites list. It's still somewhat rare to find a complete wine that is both delicious in its youth and promising an even greater future, and the feat is accomplished here. This wine is going places, and considering its quality, it's a steal. If you're a Napa collector, don't miss this. **96**

V. Sattui, Napa Valley (California) Syrah 2020 (\$45)

Napa Valley Syrah is a bit of a different animal – I'd say it's less assertive than Syrah from other parts of California, and this bottle in particular exhibits a light touch. While it doesn't scream Syrah character, it is a pleasant, drinkable offering with round edges, integrated flavors of cherry, spice and mild tar. Think of it as Syrah, refined. **94**

V. Sattui, Russian River Valley (Sonoma County, California) Zinfandel Gilsson Vineyard Old Vine (\$48)

An oddly attractive diesel note opens the proceedings here, and it gives way to notes of wild berry and a dash of pepper. The palate is solidly dry, and the berries and pepper speak clearly in refined fashion. Focused acidity gives everything a nice push in the finish, and the flavors linger long. Sounds like Brooks Painter's team... Well done, as usual. **94**

Valanda (Spain) Tempranillo 2021 (\$16)

When you see the price tag on this wine you might be predisposed to expect an easy drinking red, and while that's certainly the case here, there's a lot more going on that belies its wallet friendly sticker. It's quite complete, with cherry, blueberry, sage and dry earth aromas and flavors that linger long and beg for tapas. It's nice to save on the wine so you can spend ore on the tapas... **92**

Wakefield/Taylor's, Limestone Coast/Clare Valley (Australia) Shiraz "Estate Label" 2021 (\$22)

Consistency across all price points is a hallmark of this producer – they always seem to deliver the goods with true sense of place, whether the wine costs ten dollars or two hundred dollars. There are differences, of course, but here in twenty dollar land, the regional markers are well folded into rich varietally correct fruit. The moral of the story? Get some of this to drink now while you let the hot rod bottles age. **93**

Wakefield/Taylor's, Clare Valley/McLaren Vale (Australia) Shiraz "Jaraman" 2021 (\$32)

Here's a bold Shiraz that awaits your best lamb preparation – it'll work from rack to shank to lollipops, its well folded menthol and mint notes complementing lively black fruit and bright brown spice in a plush yet structured package – the finish is already fully integrated, but there's some upside to aging this for a few years as well. I can't say enough good things about this producer. **95**

Whitehaven, Marlborough (New Zealand) Sauvignon Blanc 2022 (\$20)

Another vintage, another big score for this bottle – it's spot on Marlborough without being obnoxiously so. Citrus, gooseberry and a touch of asparagus are seamlessly integrated and finish long in mouth watering fashion. Think adult lemonade... **94**

ZD Wines (California) Chardonnay 2021 (\$42)

That ZD has maintained a house style with this bottling despite having to reach further and further for fruit sourcing to supply the demand is most impressive. Fans love this bottle for its rich apple and toasty oak character, and you can count me among the fans. Not overdone, but big and bold is the ticket here. **92**