

**2026 Monterey International Wine Competition**  
**Platinum Award Winners - Director's Tasting Notes**

(Wines listed by color, then alphabetically by producer)

**REDS:**

**Carol Shelton, Russian River Valley (Sonoma County, California) Zinfandel  
"Collins Reserve, Old Vine, Collins – Limerick Lane Vineyard" 2023 (\$40)**

This is a classic California Zin in every sense, with concentrated mixed berry fruit, subtle pepper and riveting acidity that ties everything together into a pleasing whole. It carries the rare combination of power and elegance that rarely happens with the variety, and I'm guessing it's from one of the famed vineyard spots in Sonoma. If you love Zinfandel, you owe it to yourself to seek this out. Fantastic! Note: Post reveal shows the vineyard listed above, which is in fact a famed Sonoma site with very old vines.

**Ironstone, Sierra Foothills (California) Meritage Reserve 2023 (\$45)**

A seriously structured wine that's beautifully balanced, bringing the best of each component out. Fleshy Cabernet fruit, red fruit from Merlot, a dash of dried herb from Cabernet Franc, a meaty note from Malbec and a depth of aromatics from Petite Verdot all add up to a sum greater than the parts. You might be surprised by the appellation here, and you should know that it's a great example no matter where it comes from.

**Ironstone, Lodi (San Joaquin County, California) Merlot 2022 (\$14)**

Merlot in California is still up against it, even 20+ years after Miles made his famous movie comment. It's of course a wholly undeserved problem, and it's wines like this one that carry the torch for one of the world's best wine varieties. This is an old school example that embraces herbal character while still letting the red fruit character shine. It's very food friendly, and it'll work with white or red meats. Great Value!

**J. Lohr, Arroyo Seco (Monterey County, California) Pinot Noir "Fog's Reach" 2024 (\$35)**

Rich aromas of cherry and strawberry lead to a palate that presents those elements in a dry, elegant style that uses lively acidity to keep the flavors flowing. Accents of rhubarb, soft fall spice and faint herbs make this a complex wine to drink now after decanting, or to save in your cellar for 5-7 years.

**J. Lohr, Paso Robles (California) Syrah "South Ridge" 2023 (\$15)**

While wine production is scaled back you can expect to find some serious wine in some inexpensive bottles, like this cool climate value leader. Meaty and peppery, its plush blackberry fruit shines through clearly but keeps the savory characteristics alongside through the finish. This is a case buy...

**La Chertosa, Sonoma Valley (California) Barbera “Reserve Superior, The Winemaker Remembrance” 2022 (\$50)**

This leans quite “Piemonte-esque” in style without losing its California edge. Bright acidity carries black cherry fruit and a distinctive earthy streak. Everything is well integrated, and the acidity really shows itself in the finish, leaving a bright cherry and citrus kiss that will have you coming back for more. Here’s to Barbera possibilities!

**La Chertosa, Sonoma Valley (California) Sangiovese Reserve “Don Silvio” 2023 (\$38)**

A tomato leaf hint on the nose intrigues, and it quickly gives way to vibrant cherry fruit with a dash of pepper. Flavors of cherry and brown spice ride chalky tannins through a long finish that’s still integrating, so give it a good airing before serving. Pair with a Bolognese pasta for a fine match.

**Macchia, Amador County (California) Barbera “Righteous” 2024 (\$27)**

California Barbera can be expressed beautifully across a wide range of styles, so much so that it’s hard to believe that it hasn’t been embraced by more producers. This example is right down the middle of the range, with typical bright acidity tempering perfectly ripe fruit. It adds up to a delicious red that can run the table from white to red meats. Well done!

**Macchia, Lodi (San Joaquin County, California) Cabernet Sauvignon “Ostentatious” 2024 (\$30)**

This Cab presents with so much chocolate character that you might think that chocolate was added to the wine. That said, there’s plenty of Cabernet character underneath, right down to the dried herb notes that lovers of the variety prize. I’d lean toward strong cheeses as a pairing here. Unique!

**Macchia (California) Petite Sirah 2024 (\$27)**

A dark, brooding Petite that does the variety proud by being approachable in its youth and standing ready to age long term. Deep blackfruit and fall spice come together convivially, and bold acidity and a supple grip extend the finish. This will stand up to spicy barbecue or strong cheeses with ease.

**Macchia, Lodi (San Joaquin County, California) Primitivo “Meticulous, Heaven’s Vines” 2024 (\$28)**

A generous Primitivo that tempers its generosity with an acid level that serves to restrain the fruit just enough to make it very food friendly. Look for something on the fatty side to pair it with – it’s got the backbone to carry it.

**Macchia, Lodi (San Joaquin County, California) Zinfandel “Oblivious” 2024 (\$27)**

It’s unusual for a Zinfandel of this ripeness level to maintain so much pepper character, but here we are, defying convention as this producer is fond of doing. The pepper really hangs in there, but the fruit carries it well. Steak au Poivre would be a perfect match here...

**Macchia, Amador County (California) Zinfandel “Prestigious, Ancient Vine, The Original Grandpère Vineyard” 2024 (\$40)**

This wine carries a specific site signature that seems to come through no matter the producer. Very old vines do seem to carry a magical mix of acidity and more red fruit than black in a way that shows off their age. That’s the case here, and it’s a glass that’s hard to put down – unless it’s for refilling purposes... Great stuff!

**McIlroy Cellars, Russian River Valley (Sonoma County, California) Pinot Noir Lennox Vineyard (\$68)**

A bit shy at first nosing, but this opens wide with a little swirling to show bright raspberry and black cherry aromas with hints of dry earth and oak toast. A little tannic grip keeps the flavors dry and bright on the palate, and the finish has a strong fruit push without leaving the other elements behind. A gorgeous expression.

**Reustle Prayer Rock, Umpqua Valley (Oregon) Tempranillo “Estate Selection” 2024 (\$40)**

Oodles of fall spice and berry compote flood the nose here. A very firm wine at present, with structured tannins propping up rich dark fruit and varietally typical vinous character. If you like a bold, lusty style you can drink this now, and if you prefer a mellow, more integrated wine, you can age this long term. Nicely done!

**Silvestri, Carmel Valley (Monterey County, California) Syrah “Estate” 2023 (\$40)**

Lots going on here aromatically... Mint, chocolate, blackberry and a touch of tarry character draw you in, and the lively black fruit palate holds your attention by keeping the other elements in the mix. It’s a fine cooler climate example that is looking for lamb, and you’d be wise to oblige...

**Three Boys Rock, Mendoza (Argentina) Malbec Reserve 2021 (\$20)**

This wine shows a clear Mendoza pedigree, with a savory nose of blackberry, meat and pepper, all of which appear on the palate. The fruit character takes the lead in the finish after a savory midpalate blend of the promised flavors, and a firm grip makes it a foil for a well marbled slab of ribeye. Tasty stuff!

**Wrath, Monterey (California) Pinot Noir “Swan/828” 2024 (\$39)**

Ripe strawberry leads the aroma parade here, with dusty earth tones and powdery spice joining in. These elements translate well as palate flavors, with bracing acidity carrying it all through a long finish where a kiss of sweet oak joins in. This will be great with roast chicken or turkey.

**ZD Wines, Napa Valley (California) Petit Verdot “Rosa Lee” 2024 (\$68)**

Clove and peppery spice sidle up to deep blackberry fruit on the nose of this stand-alone Petit Verdot, followed by a juicy entry that clamps down a bit with tannin and barrel influence. That grip releases nicely in the finish, where the fruit takes center stage and lingers into the distance. It’s a tough decision for a producer to bottle lesser known

varieties even when they're this good, but the decision was a wise one here. Contains 11% Malbec and 11% Zinfandel.

**ZD Wines, Napa Valley (California) Cabernet Sauvignon “Reserve” 2022 (\$230)**

Wow! This is an amazing wine from beginning to end, and it seemingly combines all the best aspects of Napa Valley style in a single offering. Ripe fruit tips its hat to the bod side of the spectrum, but it's not so ripe that other elements get washed out. Fall spice and soft dried herbs remain present throughout, and along with the classic Napa Blackberry cassis profile they ride a supple structure out into the distance. This is a cellar trophy to be sure.

**ZD Wines, Napa Valley (California) Cabernet Sauvignon 20223 (\$78)**

Here's a Cabernet that's a delight now and promises to continue to be a delight well into the future. Sturdy structure carries lively blackberry and black currant fruit, with carefully selected oak spice adding depth and complexity. This is the sort of thing that made Napa Valley famous, and that old school streak serves it well. You can serve it well with red meat preps of all kinds.

**SPARKLING:**

**Republican Red Winery, Central Coast (California) Brut Cuvée Sparkling Wine “America 250” NV (\$47)**

A crisp, dry brut style that leans into its toasty character. Tart apple, Sorrento lemon and toasted bread aromas and flavors are well integrated, with racy acidity that stops just short of having a scouring texture. A fine mousse keeps things lively, and the finish carries all the flavors together, leaving a lasting toasty impression. Nice!

**WHITE:**

**Barefoot Wine-to-go (California) Sauvignon Blanc (\$5)**

Movie theater wine! Oops – did I say that out loud? You get the idea... Here's a portable package (500ml) of solid Sauvignon Blanc that will serve four glasses at a picnic without the hassle and potential danger of glass. Nothing wrong with that...

**Bernardus, Santa Lucia Highlands (Monterey County, California) Chardonnay “Rosella’s Vineyard 2023 (\$55)**

This wine shows a deft hand with barrel selection, one that produces a wine with taut acidity and restrained fruit flavors that are enhanced by the oak character and not overwhelmed. The finish maintains the oak toast with a dash of butter, and it lets out a lemon crème note that lingers pleasantly. Dry and seductive, this is a perfect seafood Chardonnay. Excellent!

**Carol Shelton, Sonoma County (California) White Wine “Coquille Blanc” 2024**  
(\$28)

Blends are where truly skilled artisan winemakers can shine the brightest. They have to make each component work on its own and then decide on the proportions that work the best through rigorous blending trials. Believe me, it's not as glamorous as it sounds. Yet here, the blend arrived at was no doubt its own reward, with lively stone fruits and white flower aromas leading to a zingy palate that brings peach and quince flavors to life. No surprise from this producer... Beautiful wine!

**McGrail, Livermore Valley (Alameda County, California) Sauvignon Blanc “Peyton Paige”** (\$28)

This is an edgy, lemon focused Sauvignon Blanc that stays crisp and bright from beginning to end, and while that may sound simple, it's sometimes just the ticket when you're trying to pair with a fish dish that has a lot of flavors coming at you. The singular focus of the wine then can serve as a contrast to the food rather than a competitor with the food. Horses for courses...

**Menage a Trois (California) Pinot Grigio “Limelight” 2024** (\$12)

Though this is labeled as a Pinot Grigio – the Italian name for the grape – it leans more Alsatian in style, where the grape is known as Pinot Gris. There's a wooly quality to the wine that tips it in the French direction, though it's still distinctly Californian with its bright citrus fruit. A great solo glass for a hot summer day.

**Reustle Prayer Rock, Umpqua Valley (Oregon) Grüner Veltliner “Estate Selection, Hefeabzug” 2024** (\$37)

This is a lovely wine. Don't let the shy nose fool you – it's packed with flavors of melon, citrus and stony minerality with a dash of green string bean that helps the fruit be brighter by contrast. It's a delicious solo glass of a fine accompaniment for white fish or green salads. And you won't get closer to Austria unless you use an airplane!

**Sutter Home (California) Chardonnay NV** (\$6)

This has wedding reception written all over it. Good luck finding a better chardonnay at this price point. It's fresh and easy to like, with pineapple, pear and easy oak spice that are ready to go. Who says celebration has to cost a ton? This wine has taken several big awards this year...

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

This wine continues a long-standing run of excellence with the 2025 vintage, showing that combination of regional/variety profiles that make it one of the more distinctive wines of the world, and it does so in a way that balances the elements beautifully. Tart mixed citrus, laser focused acidity that avoids getting overly sharp, moderate grassiness... This is a great example of the category.

### **ZD Wines (California) Chardonnay 2024 (\$44)**

A crowd pleaser – meaning that Chardonnay fans from all points along the style line will find something to like about this wine. Bright acidity, soft butterscotch and bright lemon and apple fruit are well folded on a viscous texture that carries the flavors together through a long finish. A fine cocktail style.

### **ZD Wines, Carneros (California) Chardonnay Reserve 2024 (\$85)**

Exquisite Chardonnay is possible across a wide range of styles – it seems the trick is to choose a style and then balance all of the elements so that the style choice reaches its optimal expression. This hits the mark for a bold side example by fine tuning acidity to match the rich fruit and oak mix in a way that doesn't become tiresome or overblown. While my personal tastes skew to the leaner side of the spectrum, there's no denying that this wine is a stylistic achievement that I wouldn't hesitate to have a second glass of. Excellent!

## **SWEET WINES:**

### **Barefoot Wine-to-go (California) Moscato (\$5)**

Sweet but not too sweet, and portably packaged to boot. I've said it before – many times – but this producer continues to crank out excellent quality in quantities that make it easy to find no matter where you might be. This wine is always a fine expression regardless of packaging, so you can be appropriately utilitarian in your package choice.

### **Barefoot Fruitscato Pear NV (\$7)**

If you are a fan of pears, this might be a drink you should take for a spin. The pear flavor is spot on, and it's married with Moscato in a way that keeps the fruit flavors forward and the sweetness in check. Chill it up and enjoy some poolside pleasure...

### **Barefoot Fruitscato Pineapple NV (\$7)**

Here's a zippy glass of pineapple and Moscato that will put you in an island state of mind pretty quickly. This product line does a great job of showcasing proper flavors without becoming cloying or overtly sweet. Chill and serve on its own, or add a shot of vodka to jazz things up.

### **Cellar 426 (American) Cayuga "Lost Lake" (\$18)**

It's always fun to taste something exotic – in this case, exotic means Nebraska, though the appellation designation means that the grapes could come from anywhere in the USA. Imagine drinking a glass of white flowers with some apple, peach and spice tones added. There's more to the world of wine than vinifera...

### **Obsession, Lodi (San Joaquin County, California) Symphony 2024 (\$12)**

A symphony of not too sweet peach and pear awaits you in this bottle of Symphony. Think fresh fruit rather than sweet wine and you'll have a good idea what awaits. One of only a few producers of the grape, and probably the best one.