
17 Off-the-Beaten-Path California Reds

These red wines run the gamut from the familiar to the surprising, yet all of them have surprises in store, even for the most passionate fans of California wines.

By **Jonathan Cristaldi**

March 09, 2022

California's mainstream red grape varieties –Zinfandel, Merlot, the stalwart Cabernet Sauvignon–have maintained a tight grip on power. Indeed, Cabernet's tenure as California's supreme wine grape has outlived even the length of the FDR presidency.

Still, the Golden State boasts an abundance of revolutionary-minded winemakers who are willing to exploit the potential of the vast array of grape varieties available for cultivation. Some look to lesser-known ones like Counoise, while others experiment with the widely popular Malbec, occasionally blending it with Cabernet Sauvignon to offer a novel take on both.

But California offers so much more than its most familiar grape varieties and blends: The elegant spiciness of a well-made Cabernet Franc; the finesse-driven, red-toned vibrato of a juicy Mourvèdre; lively examples of Carignan, Syrah, and Grenache. All of these and more offer a spate of off-the-beaten-path reds worth seeking out.

2019 Covenant Landsman Cabernet Franc Dry Creek Valley Sonoma County (\$45)

What do you get when you cross a former saxophonist and bandleader of the Grand Casino at Monte Carlo with a longtime professional wine writer turned winemaker and cookbook author? None other than Jeff Morgan, winemaker and co-owner of Covenant Wines, based in Berkeley, California. Morgan is one of the most underrated talents in Northern California, capable of producing a wide range of wines from classic Napa Cabernet to seriously off-the-beaten-track reds like this Dry Creek Valley Cabernet Franc, grown smack in prime Zinfandel territory. The result is a fresh, vibrant, and spicy red with a satiny texture, oozing with blackberries and plums, and a classic herbaceous core—sage and thyme come to mind—finishing with salted dark chocolate. Look for a dynamite pairing in any one of the cookbooks penned by Morgan, and co-authored by his wife Jodie, a Master Gardener.