

Tasting Highlights: Napa Valley Cabernet

A baker's dozen of Cabernet Sauvignons—including two classics—from Oakville, one of the premier vineyard areas in California's Napa Valley

[*James Laube*](#)

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Far Niente's Gil Nickel once called Oakville the "silk-stocking neighborhood of Napa Valley." Along with Rutherford, it's the heartland of Napa Cabernet territory, home to dozens of great wines from the likes of Screaming Eagle, Groth, Carter, Schrader and others.

Within Oakville are many key vineyards, and for years, the best-known was Martha's Vineyard. Today that distinction goes to To Kalon, and many of the greatest wines from this vineyard bear the name Beckstoffer Vineyard, which anchors this week's report with six high-scoring wines.

What makes this area so special is its deep, loamy soils and climate. The temperature is both hot enough to ripen Cabernet yet cool enough at night to allow the grapes to ripen evenly. Each year is a little different. But most of the time you can count on Oakville grapes ripening well, but not to excess. The wines also have an herbal edge (minty in Martha's Vineyard), and they age exceptionally well—witness the history of Heitz Martha's Vineyard or the Robert Mondavi Reserve, which for years has used Oakville and To Kalon as the backbone for its top wine.

Two 2006 Cabernets from Realm and **TOR** earn classic ratings in this report. The former is rich and loamy, while the latter more elegant and polished. Paul Hobbs' To Kalon bottling is a bit disjointed now, but all of the ingredients are there for greatness. But why the \$275 price? Hobbs pays about \$27,500 a ton for his grapes, and most wines are priced according to what the grapes cost—if a wine costs \$100, the vintner probably paid about \$10,000 a ton. The only wine listed here that dips below the \$100 mark is Provenance, at \$85; it's a very tight and closed young wine but it has room for improvement.

The six other Cabernets featured here come primarily from either single vineyards, such as Swanson's Schmidt Ranch (once a prime source for Sean Thackery's Napa reds), or estates, such as Far Niente or Futo.

REALM Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard 2006
Score: 96 | \$115

Shows wonderful purity of flavor and focus, with rich, deep, concentrated layers of black cherry, blackberry, currant and plum, shaded by black licorice and mineral and framed by light toasty oak, lively acidity and firm, integrated tannins. Best from 2010 through 2017. 220 cases made. —*J.L.*

TOR Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard Clone No. 6
2006 Score: 95 | \$150

Pure, ripe, clean currant, plum and wild berry fruit is supple, complex and elegant, with layers of dark berry fruit, a hint of chocolate and sage. Gains depth and momentum on the finish, which is long and graceful with fine-grained tannins. Best from 2010 through 2017. 220 cases made. —*J.L.*

BOUNTY HUNTER Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Blind Justice Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard 2006
Score: 93 | \$132

Firm and tight, full-bodied and well-structured, with a mix of rich, spicy currant, cedar, pencil lead, blackberry and mineral. Gains depth and persistence on the finish, which is long, if a tad hot. Best from 2010 through 2017. 316 cases made. —*J.L.*

ETUDE Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville 2005
Score: 93 | \$100

Aromas of loamy earth, currant and blackberry have a dusty edge. Intense yet elegant, full-bodied and concentrated, with firm tannins providing structure and depth. Best from 2010 through 2016. 296 cases made. —*J.L.*

PAUL HOBBS Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard 2006
Score: 93 | \$275

Intense and concentrated, if a bit muddled in its delivery of earthy currant, graphite, mineral and sage. Full-bodied, dense and firmly structured, with tight tannins, this offers a touch of savory herb and underbrush. Needs time. Best from 2010 through 2017. 872 cases made. —*J.L.*

SWANSON Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville Schmidt Ranch 2005
Score: 93 | \$125

Elegant, stylish and full-bodied, with a mix of rich, ripe, perfumed dark berry and currant fruit that's complex, layered, supple and graceful, ending with a long, silky finish. Drink now through 2016. 173 cases made. —*J.L.*

BOUNTY HUNTER Poetic Justice Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard Napa Valley
2006 Score: 92 | \$132

Fresh and vibrant, with rich, full-bodied, zesty currant, mineral, black licorice, cedar and spice. Well-focused, with lively acidity and firm tannins, showing depth and structure. This has a long, engaging finish and a dash of oak. Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot. Best from 2010 through 2016. 218 cases made. —*J.L.*

VINE CLIFF Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville 2006
Score: 92 | \$75

A rich, creamy style, with a dash of toasty vanilla layered with red and black fruits and a hint of anise and sage. Complex, elegant and balanced, with supple tannins. Drink now through 2016. 999 cases made. —*J.L.*

FUTO Oakville 2006
Score: 91 | \$200

Starts smooth, rich and supple, with spicy currant, black cherry, wild berry and plum, with hints of black olive, cedar and cigar box. Full-bodied, firming on the finish. Very tight at this stage. Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot. Best from 2010 through 2016. 424 cases made. —*J.L.*

GARGIULO Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville 575 OVX G Major Seven Study 2006
Score: 91 | \$125

Intense and full-bodied, with ripe cherry and currant fruit shaded by cedary oak that gives this a dry edge. But it's complex and concentrated, veering to an earthier mineral flavor on the finish. Best from 2010 through 2016. 563 cases made. —*J.L.*

VINE CLIFF Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville Private Stock 16 Rows 2006
Score: 90 | \$150

A dense, concentrated style, full bodied and a touch earthy, but built around a core of taut currant and blackberry fruit, gaining depth and dimension on the finish. Needs time. Best from 2010 through 2016. 304 cases made. —*J.L.*

FAR NIENTE Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville 2006
Score: 89 | \$125

Sleek and complex, full-bodied and Bordeaux-like, with an earthy mineral edge to the dried berry and currant flavors that are subdued and tightly wound, ending with earthy tannins. Needs time. Best from 2011 through 2017. 12,200 cases made. —*J.L.*

PROVENANCE Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard 2006
Score: 88 | \$85

Tight and concentrated, with a firm band of spicy currant, mineral, cedar and cigar box. Full-bodied, with taut tannins that clamp down on the finish. Needs time. Decant for now. Best from 2010 through 2016. 1,097 cases made. —*J.L.*