

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

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. COURTESY OF CHATEAU MONTELENA

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.