



## The Best of Northern California — 2003, 2002, 2001

A Comprehensive Review of the Finest North  
Coast Producers

VINTAGE  
PROFILE



fter an uninspiring succession of vintages in 1998, 1999, and 2000, California's North Coast is on a roll with 2001, 2002, 2003, and waiting in the wings, a very promising 2004.



Several years ago it looked like California producers, even the top wineries, were going to have to adjust their relatively aggressive pricing policies in a downward direction given the saturated marketplace as well as the competition from imports. However, the collapse of the American dollar *vis à vis* just about every other currency has buttressed the domestic wine market. Just when California was beginning to show signs of over-expansion and financial stress, the wine competition from abroad became 35-50% more expensive.



Show the Wines

There is an ocean of mediocre California wine in the pipeline, not only from these high quality vintages, but also from the late nineties. The wines reviewed in the following pages represent the pinnacle of wine quality in California. In fact, many of these wines are among the finest made in the world. Their viticulture and winemaking are as meticulous as any top estate in France, Italy, Spain, or Germany. Moreover, the quality of California fruit is often superior, although the *terroirs*, soil bases, and micro-climates are vastly different.

As I wrote in [issue #150](#) (12-23-03), **2001** is the finest year for North Coast Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot since 1994 and 1991. Many examples have closed down considerably now that they have been in bottle for over a year, but for the top producers, these are wines of considerable depth, power, richness, and impressive aging potential. **2002** may be an even better vintage, but for different reasons. A classic California vintage, it offers ripe, rich, exuberant, full-throttle, intensely forward wines. The

big Cabernet Sauvignons and Bordeaux variety blends possess plenty of tannin, but it is sweet and largely concealed by the extraordinary wealth of fruit and extravagant richness. They are top-notch examples of what California does best. It is also a fabulous year for Sonoma Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Zinfandel is the most mixed varietal in 2002, with only a handful of producers achieving top quality. A fine vintage, **2003**, for my taste, is far better than 1999, a year I believe has been vastly overrated by many of my colleagues. However, it is no 2001 or 2002, with the possible exception of some Chardonnays, Zinfandels, and Syrahs, which may prove to be the most successful varietals in 2003. It is undeniably a very good to excellent year for the North Coast, but more irregular than either 2002 or 2001. 2003 produced many forward wines with high alcohols and precocious personalities. Of the three vintages, 2001 will be the slowest for the big reds to mature, 2003 the fastest, and 2002 one of those magical years that will probably drink great young, middle-aged, and old.

The following wineries represent only a small percentage of Northern California producers, but I believe they are the North Coast's reference points in 2005. A handful of wineries from south of San Francisco have been included.

—Robert Parker