

FOOD // WINE, BEER & SPIRITS

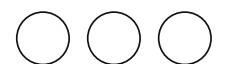
Napa Valley is America's top wine region. But it has reached a turning point that could change everything



James Clapham/Special to The Chronicle



ESTHER MOBLEY July 27, 2022



Over the last half century, Napa Valley has fought to be recognized as one of the best places in the world to grow vines and make wine — and it's safe to say it's succeeded.

The valley attracts nearly 4 million visitors a year, according to Visit Napa Valley, who come to taste its [famous Cabernet Sauvignon](#), dine at [Michelin-starred restaurants](#) and take in the beautiful scenery. Wines from [Napa's top estates](#) command as much praise —

and as much money — as any in the world: Many of its bottles are so collectible, and represent such strong investments, that they're traded at auctions.

By now, Napa Valley is more than merely a place. It's one of the great American brands, as synonymous with fine wine as Silicon Valley is with tech, Wall Street with money or Hollywood with films.

But Napa is in a moment of flux. [Serial wildfires](#) have threatened it in recent years. Climate change and warming temperatures have [called into question](#) whether its main cash crop, Cabernet Sauvignon, will remain viable into the next generation. Debates over how Napa's land should be used have [deeply divided](#) residents. Corporations are [quickly buying up](#) some of the valley's most beloved wineries from the families that founded them.

These are the issues that we cover daily in The Chronicle's Food + Wine Department. But we wanted to step back and consider this turning point from new perspectives. That's how this collection of stories was born.

We'll continue to report on Napa Valley, watching it evolve as an industry, as a brand, as a place. For now, we hope you'll guzzle down these stories as salient examples of this pivotal moment.

Revisiting Napa's 'Disneyland' wineries

We all know the valley's tourist traps





The entryway to Del Dotto Estate winery in St. Helena.

Brian L. Frank/Special to The Chronicle

Some of the most popular tasting rooms in Napa Valley are also the most controversial among locals. We visited these love-them-or-hate-them wineries and render verdicts: Are they actually fun?

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Is Napa Valley Cabernet all starting to taste the same?

There is such a thing as too much perfection



More of Napa's wines are becoming concentrated in the hands of fewer winemakers.

Chronicle Illustration/Daymond Gascon / The Chronicle

I take a hard look at the luxury product that keeps Napa Valley running, Cabernet Sauvignon, and argue that the economics governing winemaking in Napa have encouraged homogeneity.

The most historic wineries are staging a comeback

Why multimillion-dollar rebrands are suddenly the norm



Ruben Moreno prepares the tasting room at the Heitz Cellar in St. Helena.

Ethan Swope/The Chronicle

Wineries like Clos du Val, Heitz, Robert Mondavi and Charles Krug have all endeavored major renovations recently (and, in many cases, upped their prices accordingly). Wine reporter Jess Lander explores this sweeping trend.

Meet the power players

The names you need to know



Clockwise from top left, Jean-Charles Boisset, Scott Becker, Benoit Touquette, Steve Spadaro, Juan Pablo Torres Padilla, Andy Beckstoffer, Alex Ryan and Gaylon Lawrence Jr. are all amassing empires within Napa Valley.

Stephanie Zhu/The Chronicle

A new set of influential entrepreneurs has emerged in Napa Valley. Here's why these empire builders are worth watching in the years to come.

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The labor shortage in Napa's vineyards

The children of farmworkers don't want to be farmworkers



Vineyard manager Andres Urena walks through the grapevines at Hudson Vineyards in Napa.

Jessica Christian/The Chronicle

Jess Lander reports on a generational shift among the families that power Napa Valley's vineyards, and how employers are scrambling to attract labor.

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Esther Mobley is The San Francisco Chronicle's senior wine critic. Email: emobley@sfchronicle.com Twitter: [@Esther_mobley](https://twitter.com/Esther_mobley)

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Written By
Esther Mobley

Reach Esther on

Senior wine critic Esther Mobley joined The Chronicle in 2015 to cover California wine, beer and spirits. Previously she was an assistant editor at Wine Spectator magazine in New York, and has worked harvests at wineries in Napa Valley and Argentina.

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