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Tasting Highlights: California Cabernet

11 new Cabernet Sauvignons from some new faces making California's premier varietal

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Cabernet lovers know how hard it is to find a great bottle of Cabernet for less than \$50, so you'll be pleased by this week's discovery, the 2006 Black Ridge San Andreas Red from the Santa Cruz Mountains. It slips in at \$49, with nearly 500 cases made, and shows off ripe, polished Cabernet flavors. Bill Brosseau (who also makes exciting Pinot Noirs for Testarossa) oversees winemaking for partners Jim Landes and Fred Faltersack.

Though we've wrapped up our annual California Cabernet report (scheduled for the Nov. 15 issue), we continue to review Cabernets throughout the entire year. Included in this report are more debuts from a handful of wineries.

From Sonoma is Stromberg Vineyards, based in Dry Creek, owned by Ross and Gillian Stromberg, and made by Bill Knuttle of Dry Creek Vineyards. The other is Rodney Strong's new Rockaway label, made from the Rockaway Vineyard, which is located on the eastern hillsides of Alexander Valley near Cloverdale. The winemaking team of Rick Sayre, Gary Patzwald and David Ramey created an intense, concentrated and elegant wine for this label's debut. The 2006 was also exciting when I tasted it last year out of barrel.

Some other new names join our list, including Coup de Foudre (a French phrase for "love at first sight"), made by husband-and-wife team Danielle Price and John Schwartz (who also owns Amuse Bouche). Then there's the Porter Family Cabernet, which is made by Ancien's Pinot Noir specialist, Ken Bernards, from the original Richard Perry vineyard in Napa's Coombsville area, east of the city and increasingly a source of excellent Cabernets.

BLACK RIDGE San Andreas Red Santa Cruz Mountains 2006 Score: 92 | \$49

Smooth and polished, with sweet, ripe black cherry, plum and currant fruit that's pure and focused, framed by toasty, cedary oak and ending with a dash of mocha and spice. Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Cabernet Franc. Best from 2010 through 2016. 488 cases made. —J.L.

COUP DE FOU DRE Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2005 Score: 92 | \$95

Savory wild berry, currant and black cherry is ripe and fleshy, with nice touches of cedary oak, dill and black licorice that gain complexity and nuance, offering depth without weight. Drink now through 2014. 400 cases made. —J.L.

PORTER FAMILY Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2005 Score: 91 | \$95

Herbal, with touches of bell pepper, dried currant and wild berry. Trim, focused and balanced, this is intense without being heavy, coming into better balance on the finish, where the flavors are woven together. Best from 2010 through 2016. 270 cases made. —J.L.

MONTICELLO Cabernet Sauvignon Rutherford Corley Family Tietjen Vineyard 2005 Score: 90 | \$58

Smooth, rich and supple, with plush layers of currant, black cherry, wild berry, herb, tar and sage, all of which give this a complex range of flavors. Tannins are ripe and integrated. Best from 2009 through 2016. 224 cases made. —J.L.

SEGHESIO Omaggio Four Generations Sonoma-Napa Counties 2005 Score: 90 | \$60

Elegant and refined, with complex, understated loamy currant, sage, anise and blueberry, keeping a tight focus and ending with integrated tannins. Cabernet Sauvignon and Sangiovese. Best from 2009 through 2015. 600 cases made. —J.L.

STROMBERG Cabernet Sauvignon Dry Creek Valley 2005 Score: 90 | \$55

Tobacco, cedar, dried currant and mineral form a tight band of complex flavors that gain depth and nuance, keeping a firm focus, with well-structured tannins. Best from 2009 through 2016. 385 cases made. —J.L.

RODNEY STRONG Cabernet Sauvignon Alexander Valley Rockaway 2005 Score: 90 | \$75

Intense, vibrant and concentrated, with aromas of loamy earth, dried currant, graphite, mineral and fresh earth, ending with a return to red cherry and plum themes and a clean, focused finish. A step up in quality for this producer. Best from 2009 through 2016. 1,800 cases made. —J.L.

LEVIATHAN California 2006 Score: 89 | \$48

Intense yet supple and balanced, with a core of spicy cherry, currant and berry fruit shaded by light toasty, cedary oak, graphite and loamy earth flavors that gain depth and complexity. Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah and Cabernet Franc. Drink now through 2014. 1,000 cases made. —J.L.

LIEFF Cabernet Sauvignon Rutherford Auberge Road Vineyard 2005 Score: 89 | \$50

Rich, intense and balanced, with a mix of savory herb, dried currant, mineral and sage that are well-proportioned, ending with a complex finish and a touch of toasty oak. Best from 2010 through 2016. 290 cases made. —J.L.

OAKVILLE EAST Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville Exposure 2005 Score: 89 | \$125

Herb, vanilla bean and cedary, toasty oak flavors are wrapped around a core of supple currant, black olive and black cherry fruit, providing a complex mix of flavors, with an espresso finish. Best from 2009 through 2016. 672 cases made. —J.L.

SODARO Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Felicity 2004 Score: 89 | \$42

Elegant and supple, with understated yet ripe and fleshy plum, black cherry, herb and mineral notes that are focused and persistent, with fine-grained tannins. Drink now through 2014. 719 cases made. —J.L.

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