

# PURSUIITS

## Is It Possible to Build a Great American Wine Cellar?

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A seductive taste of earth and ethereal red fruit makes Domaine de la Romanée-Conti's Romanée-Conti one of the most collectible pinot noirs in the world. As its satiny texture and complex flavors unroll across your tongue, you realize just how profound a wine can be. It comes from a tiny 1.8-hectare (4.5-acre) grand cru vineyard on a limestone slope in Burgundy, with the name incised in the stone wall. Many wine lovers call the spot hallowed ground. Me too.

So sacrosanct is it that, 15 years ago, an extortionist threatened to poison the vines unless he received a €1 million (\$1.3 million) ransom. Owner Aubert de Villaine and the Police Nationale set up a sting operation and caught the man, protecting an agricultural asset whose value has been estimated at more than €2 billion.

Romanée-Conti is one very expensive example of why European wine is so appealing to collectors around the world. History, reputation and the incredible beauty of vineyard landscapes draw oenophiles to dozens of renowned regions, from Barolo to Pantelleria, Burgundy to Bordeaux, Priorat to Jerez, and Germany's Mosel to Portugal's Douro Valley. Italy alone is home to more than 350 official grape varieties, though altogether the country grows more than 1,300, some so local they exist only in a single tiny valley.

The top ageworthy wines tend to come in limited supply, but that doesn't mean they have to be wildly expensive. For less than \$100 a bottle, you can get single-vineyard reds made from nerello mascalese on the black-earthed volcanic slopes of Mount Etna or the sangiovese-based wines grown in the gently hilly landscape of Chianti Classico, dotted with olive trees.

Collecting isn't about cost at all. Rather, it's about acquiring bottles that are special because of the tiny differences of flavor and aroma. As French winemakers never tire of reminding me, it all comes down to the terroir, a French concept that encompasses the individual soil, exposure, weather, vine, tradition and hand of the person who made the wine.

So what about the star-spangled terroir on this side of the Atlantic? The black cloud of US tariffs hovering over Europe has already depressed imports: President Donald Trump's March 13 threat of 200% duties on European wine and spirits, which later dropped to 20% and, starting on April 9, was reduced to 10% for 90 days, caused US buying to slump 35%, according to the luxury wine index Liv-ex. Which presents a thought experiment: What does a "just buy American" cellar look like?

Wine isn't like toothpaste, where shifting from one brand to another is no big deal. No American equivalents exist for many European wines, such as Italy's rare white Valentini Trebbiano d'Abruzzo and delicious nebbiolo-based Barolos and Barbarescos; Spain's aged Riojas made from tempranillo grapes; or the deep, rich power of a vintage port. I could go on and on.

The idea that one should buy only American, to me, runs antithetical to the joy of discovering the vast world of wine and all its myriad flavors. The best taste like the earth where the

grapes were grown, it's true, but the final product also carries the fingerprints of the human beings who tended the vines and picked the grapes, as well as the vision of the winemaker who harmonized the blends. To savor the fruits of so much careful labor makes wine more than just a drink.

But let's play the president's game to its logical conclusion. Can you fill a good, wide-ranging wine cellar without importing a thing? You can get pretty close. US regions have unique terroirs as well, with vineyards in states as far-flung as Arizona, Colorado, Michigan and New Mexico. With some 4,800 wineries, California is still the country's primary region. Oregon and Washington state come next, with almost 1,000 each; New York has more than 500 and Texas a bit more than that.

During the rebirth of the US wine industry in the 1960s and '70s, American winemakers looked to Europe for inspiration and embraced with gusto its most famous grapes, such as cabernet sauvignon, chardonnay and, later, pinot noir. Today there's more wine diversity in America than ever, offering many reasons to collect stateside vintages. Adventurous winemakers are experimenting with different grapes: Koshu, nerello mascalese, scheurebe, tocai friulano. And Texas is having success with tempranillo.

But the most important American collectibles remain those primarily made from the French grapes of Bordeaux, Burgundy, Champagne and the Rhône. The US counterparts have their own style, swagger and appeal, to be sure: Cabernet sauvignon and its blends are the most collected, especially wines from Napa Valley that have history and a track record of aging well. Examples from the 2023 vintage, one of the best in recent memory, are coming to shelves and restaurants late this year or in 2026. That growing season yielded aromatic wines in a classic mode, with complexity, precision and energy.

Buyers can lock in rare, one-of-a-kind cuvées from the vintage that were sold to retailers via auction at Napa's annual Premiere trade event in February. Among those I covet are the Corison (a blend of two top vineyards) and Inglenook (from the winery's heritage blocks). Two others I'm eyeing are Kazumi Koshu, a Napa white made from the Japanese Koshu grape, and the 1999 Schramsberg Reserve Late Disgorged sparkling wine.

If you're thinking investment and want to splash out the big bucks, my Napa short list includes Dominus, Opus One, Harlan Estate, Colgin Cellars, Screaming Eagle and Scarecrow. But my No. 1 choice for a great collectible California cabernet is Ridge Vineyards' Bordeaux-like Monte Bello bottling, which comes from the Santa Cruz Mountains south of San Francisco.

The best makers of pinot noir in Oregon and the West Sonoma Coast and Sta. Rita Hills appellations in California have mastered some of the savor and layered complexity that make Burgundy so seductive. Look for wines from Littorai, on California's northern coast. And there's so much more.

On the opposite page you can find a list of seven American wines worth collecting, especially at their price points. Although they can't replace the range of the world's bounty, they're certainly not second best to Europe at all. **B**



# Seven US Wines for a Starter Cellar

## IF YOU LOVE RED BURGUNDY

- 2023 Littorai Les Larmes Anderson Valley Pinot Noir (\$75)

This year, Littorai is celebrating the 30th anniversary of its first vintage. Winemaker Ted Lemon's holistic generative farming vision has led to brilliant ageworthy pinots, such as this sleek, silky-textured blend of several Mendocino vineyards.

## IF YOU LOVE RED BORDEAUX

- 2021 Opus One (\$455)

Baron Philippe de Rothschild and Robert Mondavi started this winery in Napa in 1978. This vintage is a layered, polished example, with perfect balance and notes of mint, dark fruit and violets.

- 2021 Ridge Vineyards Monte Bello (\$295)

One of California's greatest cabernets (pictured on page 81) hails from a historic vineyard in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Deep and layered, with notes of tobacco, black olives and dark berries, it can age for decades.

## IF YOU WANT SOMETHING ALL-AMERICAN

- 2019 Bedrock Old Hill Ranch Heritage Blend (\$70)

From one of Sonoma's historic 19th century vineyards, this zinfandel-dominant field blend includes about 30 varieties. It's rich, polished, vibrant and fruity, with only 200 cases made.

## IF YOU LOVE GERMAN RIESLING

- 2019 Smith-Madrone Riesling (\$40)

The first vintage of this ageworthy white made at the estate on Spring Mountain made its debut in 1977. This one has a citrus and mineral purity with gorgeous texture and mouthwatering acidity.

## IF YOU LOVE WHITE BURGUNDY

- 2022 Chateau Montelena Chardonnay (\$75)

The Napa winery's chardonnay took the top spot at the famous 1976 Paris Tasting. This balanced vintage shows orange blossom aromas; bright, zesty mint, citrus and mineral flavor notes; and a crème brûlée texture.

## IF YOU LOVE CHAMPAGNE

- 2015 Schramsberg J. Schram Noirs (\$152)

The Napa sparkling wine house is celebrating its 60th anniversary. This mostly pinot noir cuvée is opulent and lush, with a supercreamy texture, and is a mere 2% of the winery's production.

