



Napa Valley 2023: A Brilliant Vintage and a First Look at 2024

BY JEB DUNNUCK | DECEMBER 22, 2025

I wrote last year that I believed 2023 would be a truly exceptional and singular vintage, and that assessment was clearly borne out in my tastings this year. Across the board, the 2023s stand out for their purity, vibrancy, and elegance, yet they still deliver depth, richness, and concentration. The top 2023s are unquestionably on the level of the 2016s and can be thought of stylistically as a mix of 2016 and 2018. This report focuses on the 2023 vintage for Napa Valley, while also including a number of late-release 2022s (and some 2021s) as well as an early look at select 2024s from barrel.

The 2023s

While I covered the growing season in greater detail last year, the essence of 2023 is straightforward: a long, cool, and highly even vintage with healthy yields and no sustained heat events. The wines reflect this directly, showing notable freshness, purity, and elegance across the board.

The winter of 2023 brought record rainfall to Napa Valley, with 41.6 inches recorded countywide between January and May. This stood in stark contrast to the 11 inches seen in 2020, 31.2 inches in 2021, and 19.2 inches in 2022, fully recharging soil moisture across the valley and surrounding hillsides.

The saturated soils pushed bud break roughly two weeks behind schedule. While late March is typical, most sites did not see bud break until mid-April. Spring remained cool and wet through May, marked by pronounced diurnal temperature swings and continued moisture.

Flowering began in late May and extended into June, and despite the conditions, fruit set was excellent. Strong cluster counts were widely reported, setting the stage for healthy yields that in many cases tracked close to 2018, another notably generous vintage.

The first 100°F day did not arrive until late June, and summer temperatures never pushed into sustained heat. June and July were mild and often foggy, keeping the growing season on a slow, steady trajectory. Veraison began at the end of July and extended well into August, leaving the vintage running roughly three weeks behind normal by mid-August.

Despite the cool conditions, there was sufficient heat to achieve full ripeness. The upper valley saw roughly 11 days over 100°F, compared to 15 in 2022, and mountain sites such as Howell Mountain and Atlas Peak recorded multiple triple-digit days. The critical difference was the absence of sustained heat waves, as temperature spikes were brief and consistently followed by a return to moderate conditions.

September is typically when Napa sees its most serious heat, yet 2023 remained unusually cool, posting the lowest Growing Degree Days for the month since 2012. Many growers had maintained heavier canopies in anticipation of a heat wave that never arrived. As it became clear that September would remain mild, canopy management shifted toward promoting ripeness, though by late September, there was real concern that some sites might not fully ripen.

October delivered warmer, sunnier conditions that proved critical in carrying the vintage across the finish line, particularly for later sites. Harvest largely took place under ideal conditions from mid- to late October, with only a small number of vineyards extending into early November. Rain on October 23, followed by additional showers in mid-November, added pressure and ultimately marked the end of the vintage.

While there was variation across sites, yields in 2023 were generally healthy and well above those seen from 2020 through 2022. Some producers reported exceptionally high yields, while others experienced sharply reduced crops due to poor set tied to cold conditions and nitrogen-depleted soils. Most estates fell somewhere in between, with strong cluster counts and berries that remained plump thanks to the lack of dehydration. Berry size was generally average to slightly small, with cluster weights often in the .18 to .20 range, on the lighter side but with good juice content.

The defining characteristic of the 2023 growing season was uniformity. Ripening progressed evenly across most sites, with extended hang time building ripeness and concentration without stress. Fruit arrived at the wineries in pristine condition, and those growing conditions are clearly reflected in the wines.

Stylistically, the 2023s can be thought of as a mix of 2018 and 2016. They show the structure of 2018, often with a touch more density, alongside the purity and freshness of 2016, with slightly less opulence and ripeness. They do not have the massive structure of the 2021s, and there is a suppleness and balance to the top 2023s that allows them to offer real pleasure even today, while clearly rewarding cellaring.

On the downside, similar to a handful of 2018s, some 2023s reflect the combination of healthy yields and the moderate, stress-free growing season with more mid-weight, charming profiles. These will be on a faster evolutionary track but still offer the freshness and vibrancy of the vintage.

Aromatically, the vintage leans toward darker and often blue fruit profiles, with graphite, lead pencil, and clear mineral notes emerging as defining characteristics. With even modest bottle age, I expect these wines to gain additional complexity, and the top Bordeaux blends are clearly built for long-term aging.

Among the red varieties, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, and Merlot all performed at a high level in 2023. If there is one variety that could be said to have struggled, even marginally, it would be Petit Verdot, primarily in cooler terroirs where the long, late season pushed ripening to the edge.

Looking at the whites, the vintage is filled with outstanding Sauvignon Blancs. While the quality of Napa Valley's white wines lagged a decade or more ago, that is no longer the case, and the top Sauvignon Blancs from Napa today deserve comparison with the great whites of Bordeaux.

Throughout this report, I make frequent comparisons to Bordeaux Blanc, and that reflects not only the quality of the 2023s but also their age-worthiness. Despite the cooler growing season, the extended hang time gave the top 2023 whites a richer, more rounded profile, particularly when compared to the earlier-harvested 2022s. Those 2022s come from a much hotter year and often show more focused, almost angular acidity, whereas the 2023s balance their freshness with greater mid-palate breadth and richness.

Taken as a whole, 2023 stands as a brilliant reference point vintage for Napa Valley. The long, even growing season translated directly into balanced, expressive wines across a wide range of sites and producers, with few true weak points. It is a vintage defined more by precision and harmony than by extremes, and one that will age gracefully over the long term. While it may not surpass 2016 or 2021, it clearly stands among Napa Valley's benchmark vintages and has fully lived up to early expectations.

The 2024s (Mostly from Barrel)

While tasted primarily from barrel, the 2024 vintage in Napa Valley is unquestionably another impressive vintage. While the 2023s are more inward, focused, and possess a certain Bordeaux style, the 2024s are a return to classic Napa Valley sexiness and opulence. Climatically, 2024 was a more average growing season, marked by ample early season rainfall, a warmer and more typical summer, and a notable early October heat event that shaped the final character of the wines. The resulting 2024s show a more open and expressive profile than the 2023s, with classic Napa Valley richness and polish, yet they retain ample (and surprising) underlying structure and tannic grip. While stylistically different from 2023, 2024 is shaping up as another high-quality vintage as well as one that should appeal to lovers of a more traditional Napa Valley style.

As in 2023, the 2024 growing season began with ample rainfall that further recharged soils across Napa Valley, following the already wet 2023 winter. Total precipitation for the growing season came in above average, leaving soils saturated with moisture heading into the growing season and significantly reducing early-season irrigation needs.

Unlike the delayed and drawn out start of 2023, bud break in 2024 occurred largely within historical norms, supported by warmer spring conditions. Frost pressure was minimal across most of the valley, and early-season vine growth was generally healthy and even.

Spring was warm and even, with little disease pressure despite the ample soil moisture carried over from winter. Canopies remained balanced, without the excessive vigor that can sometimes be seen in wetter years.

Flowering occurred in late May under favorable conditions, resulting in a largely successful and uniform set. Unlike 2023, when cool and unsettled weather introduced some uncertainty, bloom in 2024 was relatively straightforward, with minimal disruption across most sites and another healthy crop set.

Summer temperatures in 2024 were warmer and more typical of Napa Valley than the unusually cool conditions seen in 2023. Growing Degree Day accumulation finished notably higher than the previous year, with warmer conditions across much of the valley and greater variation between valley floor and mountain sites.

Late June and early July, as well as from July 10 to 12, brought the most sustained heat of the summer, with several periods of elevated temperatures, particularly in the upper valley and mountain AVAs. Temperatures reached 114° F in Calistoga, 110° F in Oakville, and 105° F in Yountville and Atlas Peak. While daytime highs were significant, diurnal shifts remained pronounced, allowing vines to recover overnight and limiting prolonged stress. Throughout the growing season, canopies remained healthy.

Going into August, the weather cooled slightly with cooler nights, which is an important factor in the vintage.

September was warmer than in 2023 and marked the main harvest window for white varieties. Daytime heat pushed ripeness and shaped the riper, more rounded profiles seen in the 2024 whites, while consistently cool nighttime temperatures helped limit vine stress and preserve freshness. Those cool nights also supported color retention and structural balance in the fruit, setting up wines with both richness and underlying tannic grip.

Early October brought a notable heatwave that proved to be a defining factor in the 2024 vintage. This was the hottest stretch of the year and dramatically compressed harvest, with much of the remaining fruit ripening at the same time. Many estates commented that fruit not already picked was brought in ahead of or during this period.

While most warmer sites were largely harvested by this point, some cooler sites, particularly in the southern part of the valley, were picked during the heatwave, resulting in wines with a distinctly riper, more generous profile. Sites harvested earlier can exhibit a more classical, structured style, whereas those harvested during or shortly after the heat event tend toward broader textures and greater richness. Temperatures moderated soon after, allowing the remainder of the harvest to conclude cleanly without further stress. As a result, 2024 displays greater stylistic variation, driven primarily by harvest timing around the heatwave. A late-October rain event effectively brought the season to a close.

Yields in 2024 were generally healthy and closer to long-term averages than the larger 2023 crop, with some variation by site. Berry size was mostly average to slightly large, largely due to the early season moisture as well as the warmer summer conditions. Despite the October heat, there was little dehydration or shrivel, and fruit came into the wineries clean, with good skin development and solid underlying structure.

Looking at the style of the wines, the 2024s are clearly richer, more opulent, and more expressive than the inward, focused 2023s. Colors are healthy, and while many wines carry surprisingly firm underlying structure and tannic grip, the overall feel is supple and seamless. Even with the higher tannin levels seen in many samples, most of these wines should offer real appeal early on.

If the 2023s fall more in the mold of vintages like 2021, 2018, 2016, and 2013 (to varying degrees), the 2024s align more closely with 2019 and 2014 from a stylistic standpoint.

The final verdict on the reds will wait until next year, but the vast majority of the whites are already bottled, and 2024 is clearly a strong vintage for both Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay. Across the board, the whites show excellent purity and vibrancy, but with a noticeably rounder, more supple profile than the more structured, cool-season 2023s, reflecting the warmer September conditions.



Above the fog line

Napa Valley and the Reality of the Market

It is impossible to discuss Napa Valley today without acknowledging the broader correction underway in the global wine market. This is not a Napa-specific issue. Bordeaux is actively pulling out vines, in many cases with government support, and similar retrenchment is occurring across major wine regions worldwide as demand continues to soften. In Napa Valley, the imbalance is tangible, with a significant volume of fruit left unharvested over the past two vintages as inventories remain elevated and contracts tighten.

This correction is not only inevitable, it's healthy. At a fundamental level, global wine production has outpaced demand, resulting in oversupply across multiple regions and price tiers. This has nothing to do with quality. The level of viticulture and winemaking across the wine world has never been higher. The issue is not excellence, but volume.

Napa is uniquely vulnerable in this environment because it allows unusually broad access to top vineyard sites. With premier fruit widely available, well-funded newcomers can source some of the finest Cabernet Sauvignon in the world, hire top consultants, and produce technically brilliant wines almost immediately. The result is an extraordinary number of polished, compelling bottlings, many of them truly excellent, but lacking a track record, a sense of place developed over time, or any assurance of continuity.

This dynamic has diluted the market. When dozens of wines deliver similar levels of ripeness, texture, and overall quality, the question inevitably becomes not which wines are good, but which ones matter. History, consistency, and identity are what ultimately separate enduring estates from short-term projects, and those distinctions become sharper during periods of contraction.

Napa's problem is not that too many bad wines are being made, but that too many good ones are competing for a demand base that cannot expand fast enough to support them.

This contraction will not be resolved by quality alone, because quality is already abundant. It is playing out through unharvested fruit, tightening contracts, and a growing resistance to new, high-priced brands without a track record. The market will favor producers with established vineyards, clear stylistic identities, and long-term commitment to place. That is not a negative outcome. It is how great wine regions mature.

The Tastings

The wines were tasted in the latter half of 2025 over two trips to Napa Valley, with additional follow up tastings at my office in Colorado. This report includes over 1,800 reviews and a notable number of perfect scores, a direct reflection of both the exceptional quality of the 2023 vintage and the depth of winemaking talent in Napa Valley today. As always, each score reflects only what is in the glass.

2023 Realm Cellars

2023 **Realm Cabernet Franc Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard** **98+**

Based on 98% Cabernet Franc and 2% Cabernet Sauvignon and aged 20 months in 75% new French oak, the 2023 Cabernet Franc Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard is another absolutely sensational wine offering red, blue, and black fruits with spring flowers, crayon, and violet nuances. It's medium to full-bodied, with a seamless, layered, elegant mouthfeel, ultra-fine tannins, and a great finish. It has a style all its own and shines for its complexity, nuances, and elegance. Impossible to resist even today, it should cruise for 30 years. Drink 2025-2055.

2023 **Realm Cabernet Sauvignon Beckstoffer Dr. Crane Vineyard** **99**

Based on 100% Cabernet Sauvignon and aged 19 months in 75% new French oak, the 2023 Cabernet Sauvignon Beckstoffer Dr. Crane Vineyard offers smoky blackcurrants, tobacco, gravelly earth, liquid violets, and freshly sharpened pencil. It's full-bodied, with a concentrated, layered, multi-dimensional mouthfeel, ripe tannins, and a great finish. I always find a certain Pessac/Graves-like character from this site (I've often compared this wine to Haut-Brion), and the 2023 has it in spades. This brilliant, sensationally complex, layered, and virtually perfect wine will keep for 30+ years. Drink 2029-2055.

2023 **Realm Cabernet Sauvignon Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard** **98**

From a Grand Cru site in Oakville and based on 99% Cabernet Sauvignon with 1% Cabernet Franc and aged 20 months in 75% new French oak, the 2023 Cabernet Sauvignon Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard reveals ripe red, blue, and black fruits with classic To Kalon flowery incense, chocolate, graphite, and tobacco nuances. It's rich, full-bodied, and concentrated, with ripe tannins and a great finish. It's hard to resist today, yet as with most 2023, the cellar is going to be your friend. Hide bottles for 4-6 years and enjoy over the following 30 years. Drink 2031-2061.

2023 **Realm Cabernet Sauvignon Estate Moonracer** **98+**

Aged 20 months in 80% new French oak, the 2023 Cabernet Sauvignon Estate Moonracer offers killer aromatics of darker currants, smoky tobacco, chocolate, and lead pencil that give this an almost Mouton Rothschild-like style. It's medium to full-bodied with a concentrated, layered mouthfeel, ripe tannins, and integrated acidity. Very much in the fresher, yet structured style of the vintage, it will benefit from 4-6 years of bottle age and keep for 30 years or more. Drink 2029-2055.

2023 **Realm Cabernet Sauvignon Farella Vineyard** **98+**

Coming from a site in the cooler Coombsville appellation in the southern part of the valley and aged 20 months in 85% new French oak, the 2023 Cabernet Sauvignon Farella Vineyard is incredibly floral and perfumed, with a red, blue, and black fruit core supported by spring flowers, violets, peppery herbs, and sappy tobacco. It's medium to full-bodied, with a pure, layered, focused mouthfeel, ripe tannins, and a great finish. The balance, purity, and elegance here are world class. Hide bottles for 4-6 years and enjoy over the following 20-25 years. Drink 2029-2050.

2023 **Realm Cabernet Sauvignon Hartwell XX** **98+**

From one acre of old vines on the estate in Stags Leap and aged 19 months in 75% new French oak, the 2023 Cabernet Sauvignon Hartwell XX delivers a huge nose of blueberries, scorched earth, cedar pencil, chocolate, and roasted herbs. It's powerful, dense, and full-bodied, with a great mid-palate, ripe, building tannins, a layered, multi-dimensional mouthfeel, and a great finish. It's easily the most structured, rich, and powerful 2023 in the lineup and will need a decade of bottle age. Drink 2035-2055.

2023 **Realm Cabernet Sauvignon Houyi Vineyard** **99**

The second vintage since they've taken over the farming at this property on Pritchard Hill, the 2023 Cabernet Sauvignon Houyi Vineyard is based on 95% Cabernet Sauvignon, 1% Merlot, and 4% Cabernet Franc and aged 19 months in 63% new French oak. Killer aromatics of blackcurrants, blueberries, melted crayon/graphite, violets, and scorched earth define the nose, and it's incredibly well-balanced and medium to full-bodied, with ripe, polished tannins and a great finish. Another seamless, pure, ultra-classic Cabernet Sauvignon that deserves 5-7 years of bottle age, it will be incredibly long lived. Drink 2030-2050.

2023 **Realm Heavenly Questions** **100**

Based on 95% Cabernet Franc and 5% Cabernet Sauvignon from the Houyi Vineyard on Pritchard Hill (just above Dalla Valle and not far from OVID and Colgin), the 2023 Heavenly Questions represents the best barrel selection from this exceptional site and was aged 19 months in 67% new French oak. This magical wine offers red, blue, and black fruits intermixed with liquid violets, graphite, crushed stone, and tobacco notes. It's full-bodied on the palate and has a pure, seamless, layered mouthfeel, ripe, polished tannins, and a great finish that needs to be tasted to be believed. Hide bottles for 4-5 years and drink over the following 30. Drink 2029-2059.

2023 **Realm The Absurd** **99**

Always a mystery blend but made with the goal of delivering an undeniably delicious, hedonistic profile, the 2023 The Absurd offers notes of blackcurrants, chocolate, smoked tobacco, graphite, and crushed stone. It really separates itself on the palate, where it is full-bodied, with a deep, layered, voluptuous feel, sweet tannins, and a blockbuster finish. It captures the fresh, classic structure of the vintage while still bringing incredible opulence and sexiness. It's already remarkably open for a 2023, yet 4-6 years of bottle age are warranted, and you should expect roughly three decades of longevity if well stored. Drink 2030-2055.

2023 **Realm The Bard** **97**

Bottled in August 2025 as the last to be bottled and the largest production cuvée here, the 2023 The Bard is based on 75% Cabernet Sauvignon, 20% Merlot, and 5% Cabernet Franc and aged 21 months in 83% new French oak. Cassis, freshly sharpened pencils, violets, and spicy wood notes all shine, and it's medium to full-bodied on the palate with a layered mouthfeel, ripe, polished yet building tannins, and a great finish. It picks up a Graves-like scorched earth character with time in the glass, and this beautiful, classic Cabernet will benefit from 2-4 years of bottle age and see its 20th birthday in fine form. Drink 2027-2043.

2023 **Realm The Tempest** **96**

Based on 61% Merlot, 24% Cabernet Sauvignon, 12% Cabernet Franc, and 3% Petit Sirah and aged 11 months in 72% new French oak, the 2023 The Tempest was bottled in January 2025. It offers beautifully textured and upfront black cherries, chocolatey herbs, tobacco, and gravelly earth. Medium to full-bodied, it has integrated acidity, sweet tannins, and a great finish. This pure, layered Merlot has tons to love and will evolve for two decades. Drink 2025-2045.