



LUCZY: 2011 CALIFORNIA CABERNET – 10 YEARS ON  
MATTHEW LUCZY, DECANTER, FEBRUARY 19, 2021



Tasted by **Matthew Luczy** (at Los Angeles, 02 Feb 2021)  
Part of **Luczy: 2011 California Cabernet - 10 years on**



A unique nose of gunpowder, dried hay, figs and red plums. Impressively youthful in flavour and texture, boasting dried blackberry, chalk dust and a hint of molasses. Tannins are ripe, fresh and drying on the finish, admirably landing at the midpoint of rusticity and density.

Drinking Window 2021 - 2031

The 2011 Cabernet vintage in California has always been seen as one for European palates, thanks to the atypically cool, wet conditions. US drinkers may have dismissed this outlier vintage as subpar at the time, but a decade on Matthew Luczy discovers just how well these fresh and elegant wines have aged.

Vintages are often placed on a continuum, with ‘good’ and ‘bad’ at either end. This binary framing necessitates an all-too-often unasked question: good or bad for what? Good for drinking tonight or good to drink in 30 years? Bad for being different than the norm or showing an alternate viewpoint?

Some harvests produce wines built for decades of cellaring, others better suited for earlier consumption. As such, it should not be only the results of ripe, pristine vintages that deserve to be looked at fondly. Each year makes wines with different strengths, weaknesses and applications.

The quality of a wine is proportional to grape quality, which is partially a reflection of weather conditions. Simultaneously, it all comes down to the winemaker and how they handle what nature gives them. This is where the difference between the competent and the world-class resides. It’s all about the grapes, but it’s all about the producer.



California's usual climatic consistency can be a double-edged sword. Increasingly common issues like wildfires aside, vintage variation across the state largely comes down to average temperatures and the timing of heat spikes and cool spells.

Winemakers, consumers and critics alike become accustomed to wines that result from these conditions. When outliers like 2011 come along, they are seen as subpar – despite calls from many for more more elegant, terroir-driven California wines.

#### LOOKING BACK AT THE WEATHER...

By California measures, 2011 was a cooler vintage. But, as Spottswoode Estate winemaker Aron Weinkauff notes, this is relative. 'I wouldn't say 2011 was a "cool" vintage. It was cooler than average, but it wasn't cold by Bordeaux standards. When you taste the wines, they don't have that same Bordeaux acidity and structure. They do, however, show herbaceousness and nuance from a relatively warmer climate.'

Even more than the lower temperatures, it was the rainfall that set 2011 apart. There was precipitation throughout the ripening process: bud break in March, flowering in June and harvest in October. The total rainfall in Napa Valley in 2011 was 97.6cm – up from an annual average of 69cm and more than the 93cm average in Bordeaux.

Winemakers had no choice but to step up to the plate. Sorting, both in the field and winery, became of the utmost importance and compounded the already-reduced yields. Botrytis issues were abundant, as well as increased disease pressure. Rain during harvest forced picking decisions, causing many ripeness targets to miss their mark.

Cory Empting, winemaker for Harlan Estate, half-jokingly recalls the tone in Napa during harvest. 'I remember being in a bar in St Helena in late September and nobody was picking. It felt like we were all going to be looking for jobs – but at least we'd lose our jobs together. I'd never sorted fruit that looked like that, but an intern from Burgundy told me: "This is normal!"'

Once the wines were in tank and underway, Empting was pleasantly surprised. 'It took a couple of double-takes to believe the Cabernet Sauvignon was as good as it was. And it was obvious from the start. The structure was tighter, with cooler aromatics and herbal hints, but texturally it had great depth.'



## HOW DO THE 2011 CALIFORNIA CABERNETS TASTE NOW?

In broad strokes, the 2011s are medium weight and acid-driven, with soft and fine tannins. There are varying degrees of the earthy and green aromas and flavours that many US Cabernet-drinkers shy away from, despite such characters being intrinsic to the variety. These qualities have now fused with an elegant fruit structure, producing expressive examples of Cabernet's true self.

The evolution curve of many 2011s showed that they have considerable life ahead of them; some are still too young for optimal enjoyment. The majority gained weight and concentration with increased oxygen exposure over hours and days. Rather than decanted, I recommend they be uncorked hours in advance of consumption to let their aromas unfold in the glass.

2011 is the best-in-show vintage to recalibrate what California Cabernet can be in the modern era. It offers a glimpse at the variety's core, often hidden under dense fruit or covered by treatment in more acclaimed vintages.

It is an opportunity to alter our perception of a vintage's quality: looking beyond the fruit on the sorting table and focusing on the wine in the bottle.

