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**Larry Olmsted**, Contributor

I travel to learn, eat, golf, and ski, but mostly for travel's sake

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Caymus, A Wine Lover's All-Time Favorite Wine

I consider myself very, very fortunate to have had the opportunity to taste a lot of unique and excellent wines over the years. From food & wine festivals to vineyards visits, industry tastings to Vegas splurges, and especially in the homes of wine-loving friends, I've had old and rare Burgundies, vineyard-only wines that are never sold elsewhere, famed Bordeaux, and obscure California cult wines.

Along the way I have learned that there is no such thing as a "best" wine, and each great bottle and varietal is suited to certain foods or occasions. But that does not mean I can't have a favorite. I do, and it is Caymus.

Enjoying wine is part taste, part emotion, and with [Caymus](#) the latter plays a role for me. I can clearly remember the first time I ever had it: I was having dinner at the [Game Creek Club](#), an excellent ski resort restaurant at the very top of Vail mountain, open to the public only for dinner. You have to ride a gondola and then a sno-cat to get there, and the menu is heavy on game, like elk and



My all time favorite wine. If you can find something better for \$60, buy it.

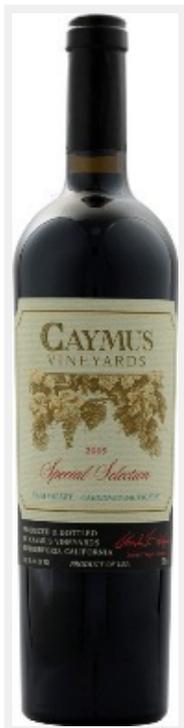
Colorado buffalo. It was 1998, and the person I was having dinner with chose the wine. When the Caymus arrived and I tasted it, I remember being blown away, not just by the taste but by the texture and body – it was a transformative moment, the first time I ever felt like I was eating wine rather than drinking it. No taste of wine I’ve had since has been as profound, it was a reminder how great wine can be. It did not so much overwhelm my food as make it seem irrelevant. From the first sip, that dinner was about the wine.

I’ve had the good fortune to enjoy several other vintages since, and it has never disappointed. It is harder for something to be excellent when you have high expectations that it will be excellent, and I have this expectation every time I taste Caymus, yet it holds up, year after year.

To me it captures the spirit of the California cabernet style that put Napa on the map: it is big, dark, rich and fruity, the kind of wine that goes great with red meat, but in the case of Caymus, it is so delicious and so well structured it is equally good on its own. Caymus is a Cabernet Sauvignon specialist in the Napa Valley, and although relatively small, it is much larger than the so-called “cult” wineries in its immediate vicinity, and its wines are widely available. It is the flagship winery of the Wagner family, which has been involved in California wine making for five generations and well over a century. They have several other facilities and opened the Caymus winery in 1972. As a result, today’s vintages include grapes from vines more than 40 years old.

I haven’t mentioned vintages yet, which I normally would in a wine review. Like all quality wines, there are annual variances and exceptional years, but one of the great things about Caymus’ devotion to quality is that there are literally no bad vintages. It has a long track record of excellence, and in its price range, around \$60 for the main label and \$100 for its Special Selection, the quality is extremely reliable. It certainly is not cheap, but I’ve had much more expensive wines that can’t compare. The Special Selection is only made in better years while the “regular” cabernet is made annually, and both are typically 100% cabernet sauvignon. Frankly I’ve tried both versions from several different years and because the “regular” Caymus is so superb, I don’t think the Special Selection adds that much – it’s an incremental improvement. I’d rather have three bottles of the regular than two of the Special. Yet both are in the price range where most wine buyers could splurge for a special occasion – and these are certainly worthy of any special occasion – while deep pocketed drinkers might find the price pretty mundane. But the wine is not.

I am not exactly alone in this opinion, and certainly did not “discover” Caymus. It has won just about every award in the business, and was named “Best Winery for Cabernet” by *Wine Spectator* magazine, which also put Caymus in its Hall of Fame. Pretty much like clockwork, the wines get 5-stars from *Decanter* and *Quarterly Review of Wines* just about every year, and consistently are rated between 91-98 points by Wine Spectator.



Caymus Special Selection is the only wine in history to be named "Wine of the Year" by Wine Spectator magazine more than once.

Perhaps the highest testament is the fact that Caymus Special Selection is the only wine in history – white, red, Port, or sparkling - to have earned *Wine Spectator's* coveted Wine of the Year honor more than once, for the 1984 and 1990 vintages. It is also one of the least expensive wines ever to win the award: The 1990 Special Selection won in 1994, and the following year the 1990 Penfolds Grange Shiraz won, from the same vintage. The Penfolds goes for over \$800, the 1990 Caymus – one of the great wines ever made – can still be had for under \$200.

The current release of both the Special Selection and Cabernet is the 2009. The Cabernet earned 91 points from *Wine Spectator*, while the Special Selection got 93 and this comment: “Temptingly rich and layered, with complex mocha, plum and wild berry fruit that’s spicy and aromatic. Full-bodied, gaining depth and turning ever more elegant and detailed, with tannins that give this traction.”

The [Wagner family](#) takes all of its wines seriously. Caymus also makes a formidable Zinfandel in very small quantities, but it is available only at the winery and I have had only had it once there. They used to make a non-Caymus branded second label cabernet, Liberty School, which was outstanding for around \$15 – arguably the best buy in California cabernet, but this label was sold to [Hope Family Wines](#), a longtime grower of grapes for Caymus (Hope continues to produce it today, still a great deal). They also used to make Caymus Conundrum, a white wine from a blend of varietals, but rebranded [Conundrum](#) as its own label, still owned by the Wagner family. More recently I tasted their exceptional [Mer Soleil](#) Silver unoaked chardonnay (\$24, not under the Caymus label). It is very easy to remember because it comes in a unique grey ceramic bottle, not glass, and it is the closest to a true white Burgundy of any California wine I have tasted. It’s nothing at all like the oaky, buttery West Coast norm, but rather green, flinty, delicate and delicious

with food. But at the end of the day, if given the choice, I'll take Caymus Cabernet Sauvignon, any vintage, for almost any occasion.

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