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Robb Report

How Sullivan Rutherford Estate Made the Best American Cabernet Sauvignon of the Year

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This story is from an installment of The Oeno Files, *our weekly insider newsletter to the world of fine wine.* ***Sign up here.***

Seeking a spot in Napa Valley to grow grapes and make wine, Sullivan Rutherford Estate founder James O'Neill Sullivan and his wife, JoAnna, purchased a particular 26 acres of land in the heart of region in 1972, on the advice of André Tchelistcheff, a man referred to as the dean of American winemaking. The flagship bottlings of the estate, J.O. Sullivan Founder's Reserve Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon, score highly with critics year after year and are snapped up by in-the-know collectors, but they somehow fly below the radar of the wider wine-loving public. As we tasted through samples during the past year, we marked the 2021 Founder's Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon as one to watch and were not surprised that after our final Best of the Best blind tasting, we'd crowned it the Best American Cabernet Sauvignon of the Year. But after we gave it an honor, we wanted to dig further into how this great wine came together.

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The Sullivan Estate vineyard is on the valley floor at the northern edge of the Rutherford appellation, where predominantly gravel, sand, and loam soils provide excellent natural drainage and result in reduced vigor and low yields in a good year; 2021 was reduced by 30 percent. Hailing from a vintage marked by sporadic heat spikes, Sullivan Rutherford Estate 2021 Founder's Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon was made with smaller-than-usual grapes, which had a higher skin-to-juice ratio that allowed winemaker Jeff Cole to "push fermentation and extract more phenolics," resulting in a concentrated, powerful wine. "This vintage really highlights the character of our Rutherford estate, with its dark fruit, savory undertones, subtle dried herbs, and signature minerality that define both the site and the broader appellation," he says.

Once grapes arrive at the winery, Cole does a seven-day cold soak with three pump overs a day. He then raises the temperature to 85 degrees Fahrenheit, inoculates with yeast, and reduces pump overs to two times per day. When the wine is completely dry, the temperature is reduced to 70 degrees Fahrenheit and the wine sits on its skins for four to six days. After that, the free run juice is transferred to a stainless-steel tank and kept warm for a week before being moved to 80 percent new French oak barrels.

Rather than opening each barrel about once a month to top them off and check sulfur-dioxide levels, Cole utilizes a method he calls "hard bunging" to create a more concentrated, extracted wine. This is when the magic happens. "The idea came to me when I started thinking about how much wine we lose to evaporation," Cole says. "I thought, what if I could create a hermetically sealed environment that allows for evaporation, ultimately concentrating the wine?" Under normal circumstances, as wine evaporates from both natural conditions and regular sampling it creates headspace, which allows the wine to come in contact with oxygen. Most winemakers use silicone bungs on their barrels, which form a good seal on them, but are easy to remove so that barrels can be refilled to the top to mitigate the headspace and oxygen contact.

Cole's hard-bunging protocol takes a very different approach. Instead of regularly opening barrels, he uses wooden bungs and rotates them so they swell and fully enclose the barrel, creating a hermetically sealed, anaerobic environment. "The only oxygen exposure comes from the natural micro-oxygenation that occurs through the barrel staves themselves, not from opening the barrel," Cole says. "This process helps preserve freshness, reduces the risk of volatile acidity, and ultimately results in wines that are more vibrant, stable, and concentrated." This is a different philosophy than most winemakers use, "one based on minimizing oxygen and maximizing the natural concentration that comes through controlled evaporation," he says.

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Through trial and error, he found six months to be the "sweet spot," offering enough time to maximize evaporation without causing the wine to become reduced. "Every six months, I reopen the barrels, check sulfur levels to protect against microbial activity, and top them off with wine that has undergone the same process," Cole explains. He reseals and repeats the cycle with each wine for a total of 18 months, allowing for three full cycles of evaporation and concentration. The final blend is made prior to the last sixth-month sequence so that the wine comes together in the barrel until he is ready to bottle. Cole believes that most Napa wines are already excellent, but the challenge to winemakers is how to push them even further. For him, it is about finding small, incremental gains to bring out the best, and this process—which he doesn't think anyone else in Napa or even the world is using—results in denser wine that is rich in color, tannin, and the phenolics that give red wine its depth and complexity.

Some credit must go to Rutherford itself; Cole acknowledges the daily coastal breeze coming up from San Pablo Bay, which cools the vineyards down and helps retain acidity along with hot, sunny days in the center of the valley to bring the perfect combination of ripeness and freshness to the wine made here. Tchelistcheff himself coined the term "Rutherford dust" at nearby Beaulieu Vineyard over 30 years before he convinced the Sullivans to purchase their estate here. Cole thinks that the phrase was meant to capture the unique, old-world qualities you only get from fruit grown in Rutherford. "It's that dark, savory profile, the dried herbs, the minerality, the bitter baking chocolate, the earthy undertones," he says. "These are the true hallmarks of Rutherford Cabernet."

Cole admits that there is a touch of "secret sauce" in the Sullivan Rutherford Estate 2021 JO Sullivan Founder's Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon: the 11 percent of estate-grown Petit Verdot that is blended in. "While most winemakers use Petit Verdot to boost color or structure, I already get plenty of structure from my Cabernet. What it brings to this wine is a plushness, an added layer of depth and complexity," he explains. He says it amplifies the dark, savory notes that Rutherford and the estate are known for. "I like to say I want to make the most Rutherford Cabernet in Rutherford, and the Petit Verdot helps me do exactly that," he says. Surrounded by high-profile neighbors like Inglenook, Beaulieu, Realm Cellars, and Quintessa, it takes a lot to stand out, but between hard bunging and secret sauce, Cole made what we consider the best American Cabernet Sauvignon released in the past year.

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The best Amazon deals to shop this week: Score the latest iPad on rare sale and more

Also in my cart? Early Prime Day deals on bestsellers like a Black & Decker portable AC for its lowest price all year and a Fire TV for a record-low $70.

Britt Ross · Senior Deals Writer

Tue, June 24, 2025 at 3:16 PM UTC

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We — and probably a bunch of other people — owe you an apology for trying to bogusly psych you up over the past month or so. You know what we mean: *Ooh, it's Memorial Day — yay, summertime!* Followed by, *Ooh, it's Father's Day — yay, summertime!* Then, *Ooh, it's Bloomsday* (that would be June 16) — *yay, summertime!* Lies ... all lies! But we're coming clean when we say that this is, in fact, the first official week of summer 2025, and these are, in fact, the best Amazon deals with which to inaugurate the season.

Prime Day is slated to kick off July 8, but who wants to wait? Here's a bunch of straight talk on some real steals that are happening now. Planning a road trip? How 'bout de-schmutzing your car with, say, a Craftsman hand vac? This one's over 40% off. Perhaps a pair of zero-gravity chairs for $22 off? "Everybody into the pool!" you say? Not until you get to the bottom of things with this self-driving cleaner at a record-low $200 off. Then dry off and let this 65%-off mini projector bring everyone to your yard for movie night.

Quick Overview

New Apple iPad, 11-Inch

$299 ~~$349~~ Save $50

See at Amazon

Black & Decker PowerSeries+ 16V Max Cordless Stick Vacuum

$74 ~~$100~~ Save $26

See at Amazon

Insignia 32-Inch Fire TV

$70 ~~$130~~ Save $60 | Lowest price ever

See at Amazon

Black & Decker Portable Air Conditioner

$315 ~~$350~~ Save $35

See at Amazon

Craftsman V20 Cordless Hand Vacuum

$59 ~~$100~~ Save $41 | Lowest price ever

See at Amazon

See 33 more

So many ways to accentuate your summer! Which is *now*. Officially. (Again ... sorry.)

In this guide: Rare Amazon deals | All-time low prices | Best beauty and wellness deals | Best home deals | Best outdoor deals | Best kitchen deals | Best tech deals | Best fashion deals

Best Amazon deals: Rare sales

New Apple iPad, 11-Inch

$299 ~~$349~~ Save $50

Apple products are so sought after that they don't really need to go on sale, and when they do, it's often because they're older models. This is the latest version of this iPad, which makes the markdown all the more impressive. According to Yahoo Senior Deals Writer Chris McGraw, who specializes in all things tech, "It's an ultra-light, thin tablet that's powerful enough to replace your laptop for most tasks but slips into your bag without a second thought. With a large 11-inch Liquid Retina display, you're swiping and scrolling in vibrant color and sharpness that makes any screen that came before feel like an old tube TV.

"If you've got a habit of toggling between a dozen apps, streaming videos and replying to messages at once, you're in for a treat. This iPad is ready to keep up with whatever you throw its way. And if you're into gaming, the graphics capabilities mean you can play even demanding games without dropping a frame."

$299 at Amazon

Black & Decker PowerSeries+ 16V Max Cordless Stick Vacuum

$74 ~~$100~~ Save $26

Don't want a new vac to suck a ton of cash from your wallet? This sleek stick's a rare $74 (it's only dipped lower than this once). It boasts strong suction for zapping up everything from dust to pet hair, and provides up to 40 minutes of run time per charge. Plus, its LED lights help you see those darker spaces, and its cyclonic filtration system traps airborne particles as well.

Related: The best cordless stick vacuums for 2025, tested and reviewed

$74 at Amazon

Insignia 32-Inch Fire TV

$70 ~~$130~~ Save $60 | Lowest price ever

If a smaller screen suits your needs, you won't do much better than this highly affordable No. 1 bestseller. It's equipped with Alexa voice control and is compatible with Apple AirPlay, meaning you can pair it with your Apple device to broadcast photos and videos on the screen. Plus, at a mere $70, it's down to its best price of 2025 — and my price trackers tell me it's never been on sale for less.

Save $60 | Lowest price ever

$70 at Amazon

Black & Decker Portable Air Conditioner

$315 ~~$350~~ Save $35

It's shaping up to be a scorcher of a season in many parts of the country, and if you're in the market for a chill new appliance, thousands of shoppers swear by this No. 1 bestselling model. Equipped with wheels, it's easy to move from room to room and can cool spaces of up to 450 square feet (there are also smaller and larger options to choose from). Oh, and this the lowest it's been on sale for all year.

$315 at Amazon

Best Amazon deals: All-time low prices

Craftsman V20 Cordless Hand Vacuum

$59 ~~$100~~ Save $41 | Lowest price ever

This is the very hand vac I use at home, and let me tell you — it's so much more powerful than its lightweight feel would imply. Is it bulkier than some of the other hand vacuums out there? Yes, but that's to be expected, given its industrial-strength performance. That said, it's portable enough to bring from room to room without it feeling like a workout, and that's all I can ask for. Well, that and an incredible price — and this one is a record low. Bonus: You don't have to purchase the battery and charger separately.

Check out my full Craftsman V20 Cordless Hand Vacuum review for more.

Save $41 | Lowest price ever

$59 at Amazon

Bagail 8-Piece Packing Cube Set

$14 ~~$25~~ Save $11 | Lowest price ever

The days of stuffing things into your suitcase until it's ready to burst are over, thanks to these clever containers. They'll keep your clothes from becoming a chaotic mess, since you'll be able to dedicate one to pants, one to shirts and so on, and they'll also save space by compressing your belongings into smaller packs.

Included are four cubes in varying sizes, along with a bag each for cosmetics, shoes and socks and a drawstring bag for miscellaneous items — all for the lowest price to date at 42% off.

Related: The best compression packing cubes of 2025, tested and reviewed

Save $11 | Lowest price ever

$14 at Amazon

Shark FlexBreeze Pro Mist Fan

$200 ~~$250~~ Save $50 | Lowest price ever

This might be the coolest (pun intended) gadget I've seen all year. No, misting devices are nothing new, but this one does triple duty as a pedestal and tabletop fan. It can be used indoors or outside, has up to an impressive 70-foot reach and can lower temps by as much as 12°. There are five speeds and two breeze modes to choose from, oscillating and tilting options ... in short, if you're looking to cool down this summer, you can't go wrong. Did I mention it just dipped to an all-time low price to boot?

Save $50 | Lowest price ever

$200 at Amazon

Zeagoo Button-Down

$15 ~~$29~~ Save $14

In case you're not familiar with the "rich mom" trend that's currently sweeping the style world, here's how I'd sum it up: dressing like one has money without being flashy about it. That means a wardrobe filled with simple-yet-chic staples like this crisp striped number that looks put together in the easiest, breeziest way. Layer it over a tank on cooler summer nights or tuck it into some trousers for the office. The blue-and-white striped version is particularly timeless, and a steal at nearly 50% off (within $2 of its all-time low).

$15 at Amazon

Amazon Fire TV Stick HD

$18 ~~$35~~ Save $17 with code | Lowest price ever

Tired of dealing with a menagerie of remotes every time you want to watch TV? Stop the insanity with this top-seller (which happens to be the newest model) that can replace 'em all. You'll be able to effortlessly switch between the news, sports, live TV and your favorite streaming platforms for easy access to millions of shows and movies. Plus, this is as low as it's ever been.

Save $17 with code | Lowest price ever NEWHDFTV

$18 at Amazon

Chefman Air Fryer, 6-Quart

$70 ~~$120~~ Save $50 | Lowest price ever

When it's too hot to turn on the oven, it's this compact countertop cooker to the rescue. With one-touch settings for fish, chicken, meat and fries, it'll have a meal on the table in minutes, and with little to no oil. Plus, it's less than a foot wide, so it won't take up much space. This over-40% markdown is the best I've seen, and there's also a model with a viewing window on sale for just $5 more.

Save $50 | Lowest price ever

$70 at Amazon

RedTiger 4K Dash Cam

$90 ~~$200~~ Save $110 | Lowest price ever

Accidents happen, and if you happen to have one on the road, you'll be glad you had this camera to record the incident. According to McGraw, this "can capture what's going on outside your car in 4K, which is important when you're trying to make out details like license plate numbers, especially when you're driving at night. Speaking of nighttime driving, the f/1.5 aperture lens allows this camera to capture a quality image even in low light."

He adds, "Not all accidents happen in front of you, which is why the RedTiger comes with a rear camera as well. It captures a wide, 140-degree-angle field of view, so you're covered in both the front and rear. The camera automatically detects crashes and locks and saves the video, just in case you can't." Grab it for 55% off — as low as it's ever been.

Save $110 | Lowest price ever

$90 at Amazon

Best Amazon deals: Beauty

Medicube Zero Pore Pads 2.0, 70-Count

$17 ~~$31~~ Save $14 with code

These K-beauty bestsellers have taken social media by storm thanks to their exfoliating and pore-minimizing properties. They contain ingredients like white willow bark, citric acid and botanical extracts to target enlarged pores, blackheads, whiteheads and excess oil, which promotes a smoother, more even-looking complexion. Plus, they're an impressive 40% off.

Save $14 with code MK1O6MJ2VG32

$17 at Amazon

Gold Bond Age Renew Crepe Corrector

$10 ~~$12~~ Save $2

Thin, crepey skin sneaks up on us the older we get, and this cream — which I happen to be a fan of — was formulated to target just that. It's enriched with antioxidants, botanical ingredients and omega-fatty acids to help replenish skin's moisture for a firmer, plumper appearance. In a study conducted by the brand, 82% of participants said they noticed visible results on their arms and hands in two days. I have to say, it performs like a cream at least triple its price, so pick up a bottle while it'll set you back just $10.

$10 at Amazon

Waterpik Cordless Pearl Water Flosser

$46 ~~$70~~ Save $24

Why not swap the painful (and tedious) string floss for this oral-hygiene hero, which gently yet effectively uses a stream of water to dislodge anything trapped between your teeth. It was designed to be compact enough to travel with (it's cordless!), and this is as low as I've seen it since October. Plus, it includes four tips so the whole family can use it.

$46 at Amazon

Nicebay Hair Dryer Brush

$40 ~~$134~~ Save $94

Your morning hair routine is about to get a lot easier, thanks to this multitasking tool. It dries and styles all at the same time, meaning you won't have to juggle a brush in one hand and a blow dryer in the other; use it to give yourself a sleek, smooth blowout or wavy curls. At just $40 (70% off), it's far more affordable than