

SHINING STAR

California Chardonnay keeps quality high as vintners add new styles to the mix | **By James Laube**



Arista's Ben McWilliams, Matt Courtney and Mark McWilliams contributed one of this report's top wines.

The success of California Chardonnay runs so deep that the wine is often taken for granted. Unprecedented acclaim and popularity as the Golden State's most authoritative white have led Chardonnay to seem like a permanent fixture of the landscape, overlooked while cultural attention turns to the latest trends. Yet Chardonnay styles have hardly been static over the years. They have changed dramatically in recent decades and continue to evolve today, with winemakers across the state rethinking and refining their wines.

The close association of Chardonnay with California was a long

time coming, vintners say. The wine initially got its following as a cocktail-like libation, leading a white wine boom in the 1970s that catapulted some brands to large-scale production. For higher quality, the first substantial change was to move Chardonnay vineyards from warmer areas to cooler ones, from mid-Napa Valley and northern Sonoma, for example, to Carneros, Russian River Valley and Sonoma Coast.

"We still feel there is a lot we can do to make more and better Chardonnay at sustainable prices as long as we approach it with the same standards that we set for Bordeaux varietals," says Phillip

Corallo-Titus, winemaker for Chappellet and his own label, Titus, both in Napa Valley.

Because Chardonnay is fairly neutral-flavored, it's known as a winemaker's wine. Its neutrality allows it to perform many tricks, since it can be manipulated in a variety of ways. "People forget we haven't been at it that long," says Napa vintner Tor Kenward, reflecting on the grape's progress. Sixty years ago, he notes, there was no mention of Chardonnay in California's grape-crush reports. Riesling and Chenin Blanc were the popular whites. It only *seems* as if Chardonnay has been around forever.

Vintners appreciate Chardonnay's rising popularity, as well as its continued status as the Golden State's best-known white, yet they are trying to avoid complacency in an increasingly crowded marketplace. Competition comes from every direction, be it Oregon or Washington, Chile or New Zealand. This is good news for consumers, since it should force prices to level off or even decline as more producers enter the fray. But for winemakers, the pressure is on. With Chardonnay having settled

into a comfortable groove of quality, consistency and profitability, they are determined to figure out what's next for this beloved grape before the groove becomes a rut.

Since my previous look at the category ("Chardonnay's Bright Future," July 31, 2016), more than 500 new releases have been reviewed in blind tastings at our Napa office, delivering a wealth of outstanding wines as well as plenty of values. Now part of our team of California wine reviewers, senior editor Kim Marcus joined me this year in tasting Chardonnays, adding a new perspective on his native state after years of reviewing mostly European and South American wines. (A free alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available at www.winespectator.com/073117.)

The good news from California is that recent vintages display outstanding quality along with uncommon elegance and refinement—courtesy, vintners say, of the drought. This is true of both 2014 and 2015. With the use of oak declining as the price of barrels goes up, there's a notable departure from versions prized for their richness and oakiness. The field is more open now, and my favorite Chardonnays cut across a wide range of styles and regions.

Every situation calls for a different wine.

In my estimation, many of the best current releases continue to come from wineries that produce rich tiers of flavor via Burgundian methods, including lower yields, specific clonal selections, full or partial barrel fermentations in oak, and malolactic fermentations. Yet there are also striking wines that have gone in the opposite direction, backing off on malolactic and oak, putting an emphasis on fruit vitality and brighter acidity.

"If there is an overarching trend, it is the ever-increasing fragmentation of styles and methods," says Matt Courtney, who oversees a dozen different Chardonnays as winemaker for Arista as well as his own label, Ferren, both in Sonoma. At this point, he says, one can find almost any combination of region, grape-growing method and winemaking style.

"If you like concrete egg-fermented Chardonnay from Santa Cruz, you can find it," says Courtney of one popular trend. "If you prefer Chardonnay fermented in stainless steel from the North Coast, it exists. If you are drawn toward ideas such as biodynamics, native fermentations, skin contact, *pétillant naturel*, arrested malolactic, unfiltered, unfiltered, unsulfured, own-rooted or organic, there is a Chardonnay for you in almost every major winegrowing region."

For the Burgundian model, consider Rombauer in Carneros, Sonoma-Loeb (now owned by Chappellet) in Sonoma, Martinelli in Russian River and Mer Soleil in Monterey. Oak-free versions come from Saracina in Mendocino and Morgan in Monterey.

This diversity has been a boon for wine lovers: No matter what your preferences, Courtney says, there is likely a producer making Chardonnays that you'll love. Yet, he adds, this can also present an increasingly confusing landscape for more casual consumers. "Finding these wines is no longer as simple as walking into your local wineshop, as many of these wines are made in vanishingly tiny amounts by artisans with



Donna and Dan Lee of Monterey's Morgan have steered their winery toward *terroir*-driven and single-vineyard expressions of Chardonnay. Their 2015 from Santa Lucia Highlands earned an outstanding score.

little or no marketing budget or sales team.”

Keeping abreast of both new producers and existing producers' shifts in style requires constant vigilance, even for the most dedicated connoisseurs. This report provides options for every taste.

Chardonnay owes its success not only to its inherent quality but also to its ability to produce exceptional wines in large quantities from almost anywhere. The market is filled with diverse styles from regions across the state. Among the highest-rated bottlings, Napa Valley is represented by Kongsgaard's Chardonnay The Judge 2014 (96 points, \$200) and Pahlmeyer's Chardonnay 2015 (95, \$75); Sonoma Coast by Aubert's Chardonnay CIX 2015 (95, \$95) and Kistler's Chardonnay Sonoma Coast Trenton Roadhouse 2014 (95, \$80); and the Santa Cruz Mountains by Ridge's Monte Bello 2014 (94, \$75).

The Monte Bello is an especially intriguing wine. It excels from a vineyard best known for its Bordeaux-like Cabernet, and employs American oak—the same as for the Monte Bello Cabernet—instead of French oak, the more popular type among winemakers.

The Boars' View bottling, from the vineyard Fred and Carol Schrader own in the Fort Ross–Seaview appellation, has vaulted to \$200 from \$125 a vintage earlier, making it the state's most expensive Chardonnay alongside the Kongsgaard. Drinkers of *grand cru* white Burgundy wouldn't blush at \$200 a bottle, but it's steeper terrain for fans of California wine.

If you're seeking the best Chardonnays overall, Sonoma offers the greatest number of choices. Extending from Fort Ross–Seaview and the true Sonoma Coast all the way to Carneros, which straddles both Sonoma and Napa counties, the region also includes Russian River Valley, home to Rochioli and Sonoma-Cutrer.

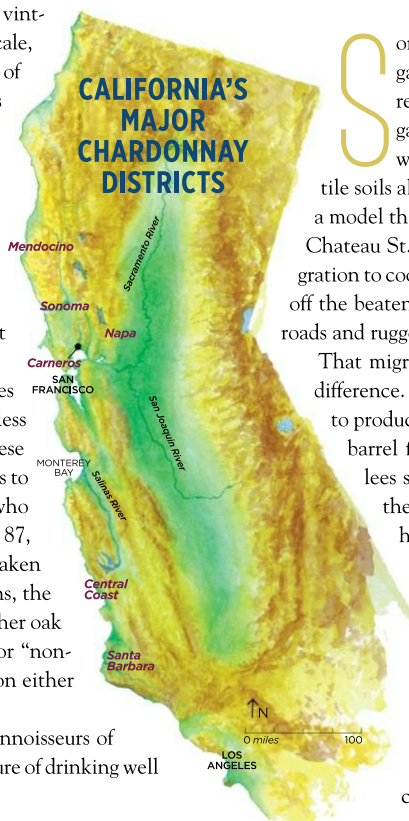
Carneros, with its moderate climate and proximity to San Pablo Bay, is enjoying a rebound in popularity among vintners. It is well-suited for farming on a larger scale, and vintners are capitalizing on the availability of land. A handful of Carneros-grown Chardonnays are among the elite this year, with ratings of 93 points or higher, including the Kistler Chardonnay Hyde Vineyard 2014 (93, \$80), Rombauer Chardonnay Home Ranch Vineyard 2015 (93, \$70), Shafer Chardonnay Red Shoulder Ranch 2014 (93, \$52) and Sonoma-Loeb Chardonnay Envoy 2015 (93, \$38). Each of these wines relies on Burgundian methods and, except for the Kistler, is well-endowed with new oak.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are wines that avoid oak entirely and ferment in stainless steel to preserve the vitality of the fruit. These higher-acidity wines are often ideal companions to a plate of oysters, says Dan Lee of Morgan, who calls his unoaked Chardonnay Metallico (2014: 87, \$22). Although shrinking sales have recently taken the bloom off that particular style, Lee explains, the bigger issue for consumers is determining whether oak is even a factor. A few wines say “unoaked” or “non-oaked,” but many don't offer much of a hint, on either the front or the back label.

But whatever the style, winemakers and connoisseurs of all stripes can appreciate Chardonnay's dual allure of drinking well both on release and after some time in bottle.



Eric Baugher, COO and Monte Bello winemaker at Ridge in the Santa Cruz Mountains, produced one of this report's top Chardonnays from vineyards known for Cabernet.



Sonoma has been the biggest contributor to the gains made by Chardonnay, but because of the region's size, it's also the most difficult to navigate. The warmer reaches of Alexander Valley were among the first areas to thrive, as its fertile soils allowed for large crops of high quality grapes, a model that drove early Chardonnay pioneers such as Chateau St. Jean. Since then there's been a steady migration to cooler areas, resulting in vineyards planted well off the beaten path, oftentimes in sites restricted by tiny roads and rugged terrain.

That migration west, toward the coast, made a huge difference. With cooler-climate fruit, vintners were able to produce wines that stood up to French methods of barrel fermentation, malolactic fermentation and lees stirring, Corallo-Titus says. “The wines had the richness, weight and complexity that we had been looking for, and our customers appreciated the changes. At that point we felt we were on the right path to not only keep up with the current direction for Chardonnay, but to compete with many of the best Chardonnays on the market.”

As a net buyer of all its Chardonnay grapes, Chappellet has worked to find not only the best vineyards and Chardonnay clones, but also growers willing to farm their

sites according to Chappellet's preferences. It's been a steady learning process.

"We became aware that in some cases the standards for viticulture in a Chardonnay vineyard were different than the standards in a Cabernet Sauvignon vineyard," Corallo-Titus says, in part because of the lower prices. This made some growers less receptive to crop-thinning, canopy management and reduction in irrigation. To alter that mindset, vintners had to pay more for control over the crop.

In some cases, Corallo-Titus says, "We have now gone to by-the-acre pricing for Chardonnay so that the grower is assured of a consistent return on the crop." Concepts like this wouldn't have been groundbreaking for Napa Valley Cabernet, he adds, but it was not the norm for most Chardonnay. "This approach has allowed us to make higher quality wines that are more consistent from year to year."

Consumer demand has driven up volume and pushed styles in many directions, yet the so-called buttery style remains embedded in many people's minds as what California Chardonnay is all about. It's so popular that it practically qualifies as its own commodity. People order it in bars and restaurants the same way they order a draft beer or a martini. One Napa vintner has even bottled a Chardonnay called Butter.

As delicious as some buttery versions can be, there's much more to explore when it comes to Chardonnay. I often find that even a little time in bottle—a few months to a year or two—changes the wine in positive ways: The flavors develop, the texture turns fleshier and the wine gains uncommon complexity, often the result of aging in oak barrels. In addition, many Chardonnays, properly stored, continue to gain weight and nuance for another two to five years after the vintage date, with some wines having the potential to support further aging.



Napa-based Chappellet buys the majority of its Chardonnay grapes from farmers attuned to the producer's preferences and values. Under the Sonoma-Loeb label, the company made one of this report's top wines, a Burgundy-style bottling from the 2015 vintage.

"It's funny how people like to say they don't like to drink Chard, but how at the end of the day, after drinking boring alternative whites, they come back to it," says Eric Hickey, winemaker for Laetitia in San Luis Obispo. He recalls a period a few years ago when the notion of "anything but Chardonnay" was in the air. That time has passed. "Chard is still king for sure," he says.

As California's most consistently outstanding white continues to hold center stage, the state's vintners are enjoying the status quo. Yet they're also looking ahead. The next act is already unfolding; producers are seeking more unique sites with an eye to vinifying more distinctive wines—much the same path that Pinot Noir has taken in recent years.

The next gains, vintners agree, can come only from the vineyard. "We're doing all we can in the cellars," Corallo-Titus says. The last frontier for California Chardonnay lies in the earth.

Senior editor James Laube is Wine Spectator's lead taster on California Chardonnay.

Rating California Chardonnay Vintages in Major Regions

	Carneros	Napa	Santa Barbara*	Sonoma	
2015	89	88	88	90	Sonoma strong again in another drought year; elegant and refined in style
2014	92	92	87	92	Drought produced spartan crop; fine quality, with yields the only disappointment
2013	93	93	88	93	An exceptional year, distinct for vibrancy and density; ageworthy
2012	90	94	88	93	Ideal growing season; wines are intense, with pure, ripe, vibrant flavors
2011	86	89	85	87	Cool and damp, challenging everywhere; best wines are elegant and scaled back
2010	88	92	87	92	Cool year resulted in uneven quality; best wines are tight and concentrated
2009	90	94	91	95	Cooler year showing toned-down ripeness, with more finesse and delicacy

*Santa Barbara County, Sta. Rita Hills, Santa Maria Valley and Santa Ynez Valley AVAs
Note: Most California Chardonnays are ready to drink upon release.

Vintage ratings: 95–100, classic; 90–94, outstanding; 85–89, very good; 80–84, good; 75–79, mediocre; 50–74, not recommended

James Laube's Recommended California Chardonnays

More than 500 wines were reviewed for this report. A free alphabetical list is available at www.winespectator.com/073117. WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

TOP WINES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
KONGSGAARD Chardonnay Napa Valley The Judge 2014 In this style, there's nothing better in California. Serves up a medley of rich, exotic pineapple and tropical fruit flavors that are as broad as they are deep. Most impressive on the finish.	96	\$200
AUBERT Chardonnay Sonoma Coast CIX 2015 A classy effort that emphasizes elegance and finesse. Begins with seductive aromas of honeydew melon and spicy, creamy oak.	95	\$95
KISTLER Chardonnay Sonoma Coast Trenton Roadhouse 2014 This creamy, multifaceted wine offers layers of fig, melon and anise flavors, with toasty oak and accents of hazelnut and poached pear.	95	\$80
PAHLMEYER Chardonnay Napa Valley 2015 A gorgeous mouthful of rich, buttery Chardonnay, loaded with exotic tropical fruit, pear, melon and pineapple flavors. Opulent and silky.	95	\$75
BOARS' VIEW Chardonnay Sonoma Coast 2014 A rich, buttery style, where the toasty oak adds allure and texture, joining with pure green apple, melon, white peach, anise and fig flavors.	94	\$200
RIDGE Chardonnay Santa Cruz Mountains Monte Bello 2014 Rich and crystalline, featuring concentrated apple, pear and fig flavors, supported by ample acidity. Pure midpalate, with a powerful finish.	94	\$75
ARISTA Chardonnay Russian River Valley Banfield Vineyard 2014 This is built around exotic wood scents of smoke and butterscotch that complement the rich core of fig, apricot and honeydew melon.	93	\$70
CHATEAU ST. JEAN Chardonnay Sonoma County Reserve 2014 Offers rich fruit and smoky, toasty oak. This is full and fulfilling, deep and concentrated, echoing apple, melon, anise and cedar flavors.	93	\$50
KISTLER Chardonnay Carneros Hyde Vineyard 2014 Serves up rich flavors of fig, vanilla, apricot and roasted marshmallow, working around the theme of smoky, toasty oak. Deep and persistent.	93	\$80
MARTINELLI Chardonnay Russian River Valley Zio Tony Ranch 2014 Makes a substantive statement, presenting a rich array of earthy fig, honeydew, apricot and nectarine flavors. Zesty, featuring lively acidity.	93	\$58
MERRYVALE Chardonnay Napa Valley Silhouette 2014 Rich and graceful, showing a purity of fruit and finesse. Focused on juicy white peach, nectarine and anise notes.	93	\$65
MOUNT EDEN VINEYARDS Chardonnay Santa Cruz Mountains 2013 Very distinctive, with a unique profile of flinty limestone, minerally citrus, green pear, honeydew and honeysuckle flavors.	93	\$64
RAM'S GATE Chardonnay Russian River Valley El Diablo Vineyard 2014 Brimming with rich, lively flavors of white peach, tangerine, nectarine and green apple, maintaining a zesty presence.	93	\$64
ROMBAUER Chardonnay Carneros Home Ranch Vineyard 2015 Ultrarich, smooth and creamy, with tiers of fig, apricot, honeydew, custard, apple and oak flavors that fade to butterscotch accents.	93	\$70
SHAFFER Chardonnay Napa Valley Carneros Red Shoulder Ranch 2014 Elegance and finesse define the pear, melon and honeysuckle flavors. The creamy texture features a touch of pithy citrus skin.	93	\$52

TOP WINES (continued)

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
SONOMA-LOEB Chardonnay Carneros Envoy 2015 Pure, with tiers of honey, butterscotch, melon, fig and apricot that are intense and direct, shaded by light buttery and cedary oak.	93	\$38
WAYFARER Chardonnay Fort Ross-Seaview Wayfarer Vineyard 2015 Ultrarich and flavorful, with a tasty mix of tangerine, nectarine, white peach and honeysuckle flavors woven together in a full-bodied style.	93	\$80

TOP VALUES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
HAHN Chardonnay Santa Lucia Highlands SLH 2015 Vibrant and rich-tasting, with a complex array of fig, quince, pear and ripe citrus flavors.	91	\$25
KENDALL-JACKSON Chardonnay California Vintner's Reserve 2015 Plush, with loads of richness to the well-honed flavors of beeswax, baked pear and lemon tart.	91	\$17
SANTA BARBARA WINERY Chardonnay Sta. Rita Hills Reserve 2014 Mouthfilling flavors of ginger, gooseberry and white berry are focused and well-proportioned.	91	\$25
HESS SELECT Chardonnay Monterey County 2015 Exuberantly spicy, with ripe pear, apple compote and apricot flavors.	90	\$12
LA CREMA Chardonnay Monterey 2015 Balanced and fruity, with juicy apricot, pear and guava flavors.	90	\$20
SARACINA Chardonnay Mendocino County Unoaked 2016 The green apple, pear and tangerine notes shine, with a citrus edge.	90	\$20
CALERA Chardonnay Central Coast 2015 Offers flavors of lemon-lime, white currant and Asian pear.	89	\$20
THE SEEKER Chardonnay California 2015 White plum and cherry flavors are accented by notes of sugar snap pea.	89	\$14
BUEHLER Chardonnay Russian River Valley 2014 Offers complex pear, apple, honeydew and light spicy oak notes.	88	\$18
FETZER Chardonnay California Sundial 2015 A fruit-driven style, with peach, nectarine and tangerine flavors.	88	\$10
KENDALL-JACKSON Chardonnay California Avant 2015 Offers flavors of apple, pear and allspice, with oaky overtones.	88	\$17
STERLING Chardonnay Napa Valley 2015 Highlights green apple and pear flavors, with floral and spicy aromas.	88	\$18
WINE CUBE Chardonnay California 2014 Focuses on rich fruit, with tropical touches and light oak flavors.	88	\$18 3L
EDNA VALLEY Chardonnay Central Coast 2015 Straddles the line between grapefruit and tangerine citrus flavors.	87	\$15
JAM Chardonnay California Butter 2015 Casts Chardonnay in a pleasing fruit cocktail essence.	87	\$16
SMOKING LOON Chardonnay California Steelbird Unoaked 2015 Features a vibrant core of lemon-lime and green apple flavors.	87	\$9