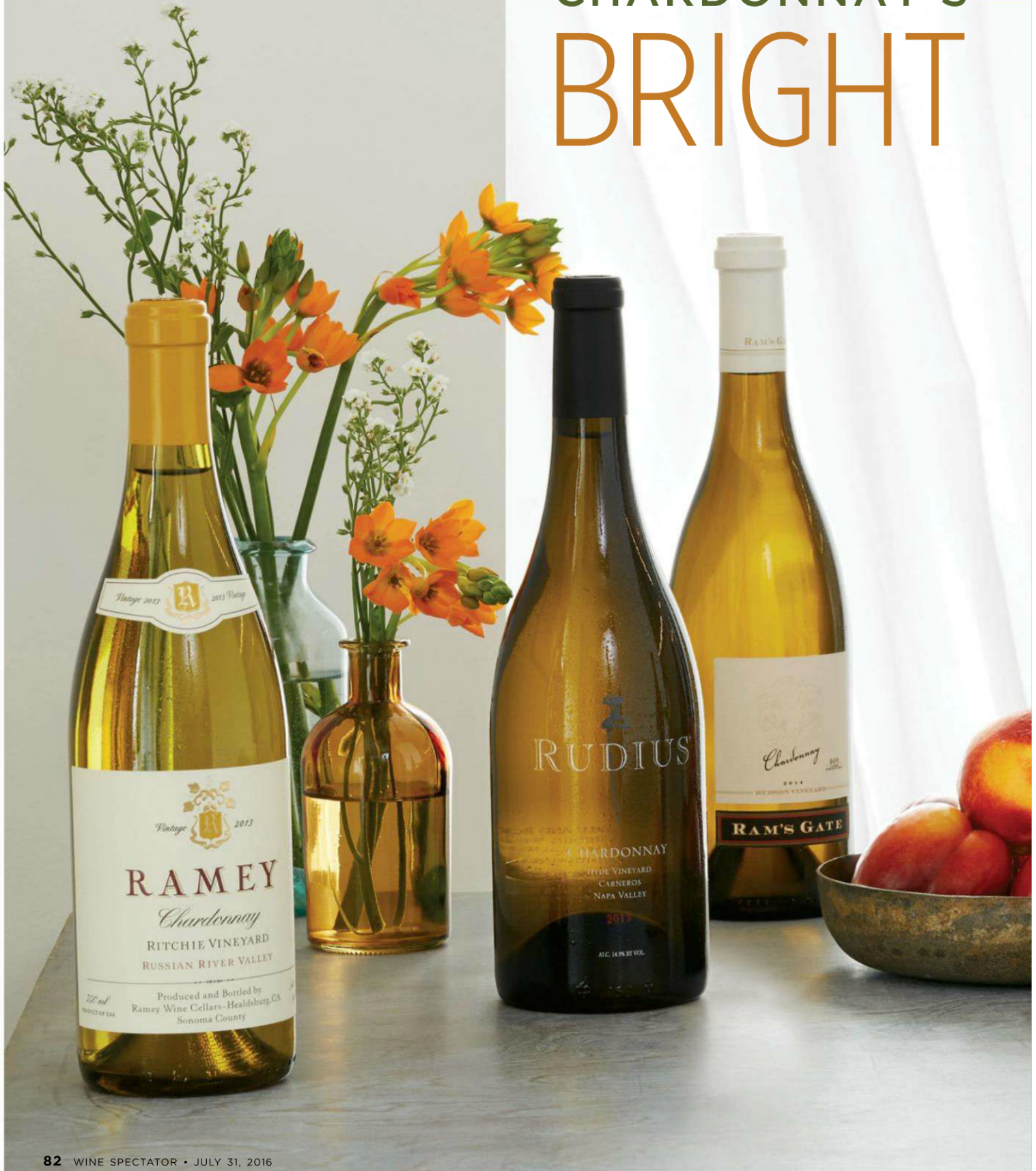


# CHARDONNAY'S BRIGHT



# FUTURE

*Vintners explore new directions for California's signature white wine*

BY JAMES LAUBE

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As summertime arrives, Chardonnay moves to center stage for many wine drinkers. Though more choices abound every year as other whites make gains—Sauvignon Blanc and Rhône whites in particular—Chardonnay remains the gold standard. It is about as close to “can’t miss” as it gets from the Golden State.

Yet California Chardonnay is in a moment of transition, no longer representing a singular style or mindset. One glimpse down the aisle at your local wineshop will make this evolution apparent—there are more styles than ever before. Many of the current crop of wines look and taste different from those of the past.

It’s always been hard to go wrong with California Chardonnay. Vintages rarely disappoint, even when there are slight variations between years. As the excellent 2014 vintage moves into the spotlight, the versatility of Chardonnay is increasingly on display. From affordable versions with little or no oak to more sophisticated renditions inspired by white Burgundy, there’s something for everyone—and for every budget and occasion.

The 2014 vintage came off without a hitch. A frost-free drought year meant everything started very early in the vineyard. This caused concern that the grapes would ripen too soon, but weather patterns turned cooler by late spring and summer, allowing a more desired balance, says Sonoma vintner Bibiana González Rave, who makes the wines at Wayfarer as well as her own Cattleya. The one hiccup: The drought cut crop size, which decreased volume. Otherwise the weather allowed for wines with bright, complex aromas and good aging potential.

After reviewing nearly 450 new releases since my last report (“California’s Sleek 2013 Chardonnays,” July 31, 2015), most of them from 2013 and 2014, several themes are evident. The first is the uniformly high quality of recent vintages, with each of the harvests from 2012 to 2014 producing outstanding results. (A free alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available at [www.winespectator.com/073116](http://www.winespectator.com/073116).)

The second theme is the experimentation taking place across the state. Despite the continued success at the upper echelon—populated by a dozen or so brands, mostly in Sonoma—a growing number of winemakers are moving away from the tried-and-true and testing out new styles and techniques. They are focusing on single vineyards



Rombauer Vineyards winemaker Richie Allen (left) and second-generation proprietor Koerner “KR” Rombauer III taste recent Chardonnays at their St. Helena winery. The Rombauer team has been making top-rated versions for more than two decades.

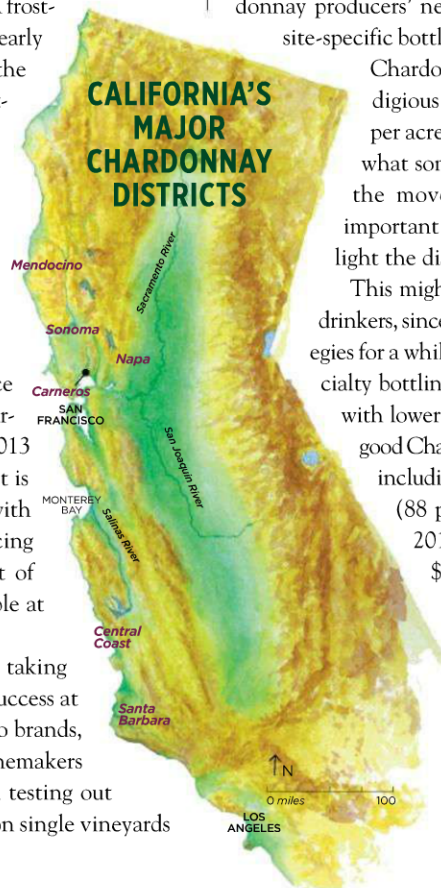
and low yields, while eschewing oak and malolactic fermentation, all in an effort to produce long-lived Chardonnays that will express the distinctive character of their *terroir* as they age.

The success of Pinot Noir has been a significant factor in Chardonnay producers’ newfound emphasis on reduced tonnage and site-specific bottlings, the hallmarks of high quality Pinot. Yet

Chardonnay, unlike Pinot, naturally produces prodigious crops, with some sites yielding up to 5 tons per acre if left to their own devices, more than twice what some vintners limit their crops to. This makes the move toward restrained yields a particularly important step in the effort to raise quality and highlight the distinctive character of specific vineyards.

This might be familiar territory for some Chardonnay drinkers, since top producers have been pursuing these strategies for a while, but it’s news to others. The increase in specialty bottlings means higher prices in many cases, along with lower production. There are still a handful of very good Chardonnays produced at 100,000 cases or more—including, in this report, the Bogle California 2014 (88 points, \$10), Sonoma-Cutrer Sonoma Coast 2014 (88, \$23) and Rombauer Carneros (88, \$36)—but the vast majority of fine Chardonnays are made in much smaller quantities.

In general, the stylistic changes Chardonnay is seeing right now are more subtle than overt. Winemakers see this moment as an opportunity to further carve out their niches, define their brands and convince wine drinkers of the merits of their choices and modifications. Yet it is



not only vintners' pursuit of perfection that is driving the market for Chardonnay, but also the shifting mood and tastes of consumers.

One major development has been wines with little or even no oak, a change from the barrel-fermented style long associated with California Chardonnay. In addition, there has been a greater emphasis on acidity, vibrancy, elegance and structure, a trend that became more pronounced with the 2012 and 2013 vintages. Whatever one thinks of the style, it would be hard not to notice the lower prices that can accompany unoaked bottlings, which avoid the costs of expensive French barrels. (There are also more affordable Chardonnays in general due to the competition engendered by having a wider range of options on the market.)

Examples of this style include the Marimar Estate Chardonnay Russian River Valley Don Miguel Vineyard Acero Unoaked 2014 (91, \$29), a sharply focused white offering a flamboyant mix of flavors; the rich and juicy Saracina Chardonnay Mendocino County Unoaked 2015 (90, \$18), made by the family that built Fetzer into a powerhouse; and the Foley Chardonnay Sta. Rita Hills Steel 2013 (90, \$30), which is lively and elegant.

"There are all kinds of Chardonnays," says David Ramey of Ramey Wine Cellars. One of the deans of Sonoma wine, Ramey has been making Chardonnay here since the 1970s, when it caught fire and fueled a white wine boom.

Addressing the range of styles available to producers "is a big question because it involves so many variables," he says. After making the baseline decision of what style to pursue—bigger and richer interpretations or trimmer, more refined renderings—vintners have a host of considerations to address, including whether or not to use malolactic or secondary fermentations and whether or not to use



Spanish native Marimar Torres, pictured here at her Russian River Valley estate, produced an outstanding example of the unoaked style of Chardonnay in 2014.

oak (and if so, how much). This has caused "a lot of confusion" in the market, Ramey says, since consumers have to keep up with these swings and adjustments.

"If Chardonnay is overoaked, let's go stainless," Ramey explains of the thinking. "If alcohol is too high, let's go 'in pursuit of balance'"—a reference to a movement started in 2011 that aims to produce wines of greater subtlety and restraint, with higher acidity and lower alcohol. Ramey thinks that the IPOB influence has been positive overall, leading vintners to reassess their goals and opening up opportunities for different expressions.

That said, many veteran producers are staying the course with their well-established styles, even if there's some fine-tuning along the way. In addition to Ramey, this group includes top estates such as Aubert, Paul Hobbs, Peter Michael, Mount Eden, Lewis and Rochioli.

"The way we deal with Chardonnay is we see the wisdom of the past

15 to 20 years," Ramey says, referring to the approach that he and others began pursuing in the 1990s, involving spartan yields, fully ripe fruit, malolactic fermentation, barrel aging, native yeasts and a lack of filtration. The goal is to produce wines that reflect *terroir* and develop in the bottle rather than show their cards earlier.

Ramey believes the challenge facing winemakers has to do with ripeness. "How do you define it?" he says. "In classic white Burgundy, you want the grapes as ripe as you could get them. Good white Burgundy could hit 15 percent alcohol naturally." So can California Chardonnay, and with even greater ease, giving vintners the latitude to pick at many levels of ripeness. That helps to account for the wide range of styles, from trimmer, steelier versions to more opulent interpretations. This makes each winemaking decision all the more important.

## Rating California Chardonnay Vintages in Major Regions

	Carneros	Napa	Santa Barbara*	Sonoma	
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
2008	87	92	86	91	Frost and fire didn't spoil the vintage, though quality is variable; tight, concentrated wines

\*Santa Barbara, Santa 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

“IF CHARDONNAY IS OVERTAKED, LET’S GO STAINLESS. IF ALCOHOL IS TOO HIGH, LET’S GO ‘IN PURSUIT OF BALANCE.’” —DAVID RAMEY

For the past decade, Chardonnay has followed a similar path as its Burgundy companion Pinot Noir, with a focus on cooler-climate sites and a more distinctive sense of place. Newcomers such as Ferren and reboots such as Arista typify this trend. Former Marcassin winemaker Matt Courtney is overseeing the style for both wineries, producing a handful of single-vineyard bottlings at each estate, including the Ferren Chardonnay Sonoma Coast Silver Eagle Vineyard 2013 (94, \$75) and Arista Chardonnay Russian River Valley Ritchie Vineyard 2013 (94, \$60).

Another producer taking her winery in a new direction is Anne Moller-Racke of the Donum Estate in Carneros, whose Chablis-like Chardonnay Carneros Single Vineyard 2013 (89, \$60) is tense and vibrant. To make Chardonnays that reflect *terroir*, she says, requires a greater emphasis on fruit purity and vibrancy, which means navier, brighter acidity and the eschewal of malolactic fermentation. She believes that what makes vineyard sites unique will become more apparent with aging, similar to what happens with Pinot.

According to Moller-Racke, one of the elements driving Burgundian-style wines in the past was the goal of making white wines for red wine drinkers. “People who don’t drink red wine like to have their white wines richer,” she says, and that’s been the aim for many vintners in the past decade. One prime example is Napa’s Kongsgaard, which ages its Chardonnay for more than a year in oak, yielding whites that deliver tiers of richness and layers of flavor.

The stylistic shifts of recent years have been gradual, in sync with the move toward cooler-climate areas. Jayson Pahlmeyer’s Sonoma

Coast project Wayfarer embodies the push toward cooler sites, where achieving ripeness can be a bigger concern than taming it. In the past few vintages, more and more California Chardonnays share the characteristics of Wayfarer’s Chardonnay Fort Ross–Seaview Wayfarer Vineyard 2014 (93, \$85), showing higher acidities along with more green apple, lemon-lime and pithy citrus character.

The emphasis vintners are putting on the Burgundy model of expressing site through longevity is controversial in some quarters. Aging wine requires good cellar conditions, a luxury many consumers don’t have. Moreover, the popularity of the fresh fruit flavors that come from young Chardonnay has proved enduring, making it questionable whether consumers will switch over to aged versions.

Winemakers of every stripe agree that California Chardonnay has often lacked a sense of place and that *terroir* could be more fully expressed. That it hasn’t is due to choices made during the wine-making process. Easing up on malolactic fermentation—or eliminating it altogether—is one way to play down the role of the winemaker. The reduction or elimination of oak—especially at the toasty, smoky end of the spectrum—is another. But these changes are a hard sell. The preference among many consumers is still for Chardonnay that uses malolactic fermentation and oak treatment to build more flavor and texture into the wine.

Chardonnay is the ultimate winemaker’s wine since the variety is so deeply versatile and therefore so amenable to manipulation. As winemakers push deeper into the phase of *terroir*-driven, single-vineyard bottlings, consumers must reacquaint themselves with a wine they love, now no longer masked behind so much oak and richness. It remains to be seen whether the new styles of Chardonnay will inspire the same consumer acceptance—and even passion—that the grape’s more familiar iterations have in the past. But whatever your preference, there’s no doubt that this is an exciting time for Chardonnay, a moment ripe with experimentation, discovery and—above all—great wines.

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



The Donum Estate is focusing on higher acidities and greater purity of fruit in its Carneros vineyards, with the goal of making Chardonnays that express a unique sense of place.

## James Laube's Recommended California Chardonnays

Nearly 450 wines were reviewed for this report. A free alphabetical list is available at [www.winespectator.com/073116](http://www.winespectator.com/073116). WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

### TOP WINES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
<b>KONGSGAARD Chardonnay Napa Valley The Judge 2013</b> There's a lot of new toasty oak here, with rich apricot, fig, honeydew and citrus notes joining in the chorus. Long and full.	95	\$175
<b>LEWIS Chardonnay Napa Valley 2014</b> Bold, rich and creamy, yet remarkably elegant and graceful, with ripe white peach, nectarine, honeysuckle, fig and floral flavors.	95	\$55
<b>MOUNT EDEN VINEYARDS Chardonnay Santa Cruz Mountains 2012</b> Spicy, toasty oak offers an enticing start, with a fresh, vibrant core of lemon-lime, lemon curd, white peach and stone fruit.	95	\$60
<b>RAM'S GATE Chardonnay Carneros Hyde Vineyard 2013</b> A rich, dense, layered mix of smoky oak, ripe fig, butterscotch, lemon peel and spice coats the palate, revealing depth and intensity.	95	\$68
<b>RUDIUS Chardonnay Napa Valley Carneros Hyde Vineyard 2013</b> Tightly focused, rich and fresh, offering a broad mix of fleshy white peach, apricot, green fig and lemon-lime flavors.	95	\$48
<b>ARISTA Chardonnay Russian River Valley 2013</b> Ultrarich, with a wealth of fruit and flavor dimensions, from the cloak of toasty oak to the core of ripe pear, honeydew, green fig and citrus.	94	\$46
<b>ARISTA Chardonnay Russian River Valley Ritchie Vineyard 2013</b> Presents a tight, solid, direct core of pear, apple, citrus and melon flavors, fanning out with a splash of toasty oak.	94	\$60
<b>BENOVIA Chardonnay Fort Ross-Seaview 2013</b> A wine of verve, depth and texture, with a flinty stone note leading to a mix of white peach, tangerine and butterscotch.	94	\$48
<b>FERREN Chardonnay Sonoma Coast Frei Road Vineyard 2013</b> Offers a tight beam of citrus, green apple and white peach notes at the core, with lots of exotic smoky oak nuances.	94	\$75
<b>FERREN Chardonnay Sonoma Coast Lancel Creek Vineyard 2013</b> Toasty oak and rich fruit are well-integrated in this deftly balanced effort, with notes of fig, white peach, citrus and honeydew.	94	\$75
<b>FERREN Chardonnay Sonoma Coast Silver Eagle Vineyard 2013</b> Lively acidity keeps the tiers of smoke, butterscotch, marshmallow, white peach and nectarine flavors fresh in this rich style.	94	\$75
<b>KISTLER Chardonnay Carneros Hudson Vineyard 2013</b> Combines richness with a creamy texture, allowing the taut citrus, pear, melon and fig notes to fan out, gaining depth and length.	94	\$80
<b>RAM'S GATE Chardonnay Carneros Sangiacomo Vineyards Green Acres 2013</b> A refreshingly clean and lively version, offering zesty white peach, apricot, green apple, pear, fig and honeydew notes.	94	\$62
<b>RAMEY Chardonnay Russian River Valley Ritchie Vineyard 2013</b> Shows amazing vibrancy and purity of flavor, brimming with juicy, lemon-scented green apple, white peach and tangerine notes.	94	\$65
<b>ROCHIOLI Chardonnay Russian River Valley River Block 2014</b> Remarkably pure, this shows richness, depth and an elegant body, offering ripe pear, honeydew, peach, apricot and fig notes.	94	\$68

### TOP WINES (continued)

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
<b>SHIBUMI KNOLL Chardonnay Russian River Valley Buena Tierra Vineyard 2013</b> Juicy, complex and approachable, offering a mix of grapefruit and lemon notes, with green apple, melon and white peach details.	94	\$90
<b>AUBERT Chardonnay Sonoma Coast Lauren 2014</b> Sleek and graceful, with rich, elegant flavors, offering subtle shades of peach, nectarine, honeydew, tangerine and light oak.	93	\$95
<b>JOURNEYMAN Chardonnay Sonoma Coast 2013</b> A Burgundian expression, with rich, detailed flavors of pear, spice, nutmeg and honeydew, showing textural finesse and nuance.	93	\$48
<b>PETER MICHAEL Chardonnay Knights Valley Point Rouge 2013</b> Ideal for fans of well-oaked, tropical fruit-driven Chardonnays, with a buttery hint offsetting rich pineapple and guava flavors.	93	\$205
<b>RIDGE Chardonnay Santa Cruz Mountains Estate 2014</b> Starts assertively oaky, but becomes more compelling as the oak recedes, offering rich pear, melon, honeydew and spice flavors.	93	\$50
<b>STERLING Chardonnay Napa Valley Reserve 2013</b> Combines richness with subtle lift, as the creamy, smoky oak joins custard, vanilla, fig and doughy piecrust notes.	93	\$60
<b>WAYFARER Chardonnay Fort Ross-Seaview Wayfarer Vineyard 2014</b> Shows creamy tangerine and nectarine flavors, with lively acidity and a pithy citrus peel texture, gaining depth and nuance.	93	\$85

### TOP VALUES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
<b>CALERA Chardonnay Central Coast 2014</b> A delicate style, with white peach, mandarin orange and pear flavors.	90	\$20
<b>CHATEAU ST. JEAN Chardonnay Alexander Valley Robert Young Vineyard Single Vineyard 2013</b> Assertive and rich, with oak, fig, apricot, melon and citrus notes.	90	\$25
<b>THE HESS COLLECTION Chardonnay Napa Valley 2013</b> Fresh and zesty, this round white has peach and lemon-lime flavors.	90	\$22
<b>SARACINA Chardonnay Mendocino County Unoaked 2015</b> Floral scents turn rich and juicy, with peach and nectarine flavors.	90	\$18
<b>RODNEY STRONG Chardonnay Sonoma Coast 2014</b> Shows the grape's tarter, citrusy side in a lip-smacking way.	89	\$25
<b>BERINGER Chardonnay Napa Valley 2014</b> Offers rich, lively flavors of citrus, green apple, pear and honeydew.	88	\$18
<b>BOGLE Chardonnay California 2014</b> Creamy and succulent, with an elegant mix of pear, honeydew and fig.	88	\$10
<b>CASTLE ROCK Chardonnay Central Coast 2014</b> Effusively fruity and juicy, with pear, honeydew and tropical flavors.	88	\$10
<b>HANNA Chardonnay Russian River Valley 2014</b> Clean, fresh and vibrant, with a lively core of citrus-infused flavors.	88	\$20
<b>RAYMOND Chardonnay Napa Valley Reserve Selection 2014</b> An elegant style, with tangerine, nectarine and white peach flavors.	88	\$20
<b>SONOMA-CUTRER Chardonnay Sonoma Coast 2014</b> Green apple, melon and citrus peel notes show an edge of cedary oak.	88	\$23