

# Wine Spectator

## Chardonnay's Bright Future

Vintners explore new directions for California's signature white wine

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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.)

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 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 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.

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 nervier, 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 winemaking 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.