



Chardonnay

...ndies. These days California is enjoying an unbroken streak, with seven straight excellent vintages as rated by Wine Spectator. It's all consistency, quality, and prices that are so low.

Every grape has a famed home. Chardonnay's is Burgundy. While its origins are in France, white mutation of Chardonnay grapes first came to California in the 1800s. Today there are over 30 different official French clones of Chardonnay, with favorite numbers sought the world over: 76, 77, 95, 96, 809.

Along the Silverado Trail in the Napa Valley, Pine Ridge Winery lists its Dijon clones right on the label. Owner and winemaker Gary Andrus says, "We're very excited about our Dijon clones. We grow 95% of our grapes, and our com-

mitment to produce estate-bottled Napa Valley wines of the highest quality involves vineyard management as the pivotal clue."

In the Napa Valley, Chardonnay is by far the leading white wine varietal with 10,000 acres. The list of Napa wineries that make extraordinary Chardonnays reads like a veritable Who's Who: among them, Beaulieu, Cuvaison, Ferrari-Carano, and Signorello. The legendary Miljenko "Mike" Gajich of Gajich Hills Cellar—the man who made the Chardonnay that won the 1976 Paris tasting—still produces big, mouth-filling Chardonnays with buttery, creamy accents.

Napa's soils and microclimates are so distinctive that a winery like Chateau Wolf can produce five unique Chardonnays from vineyards in the same appellation. But with the shortage of premium vineyard land in the Napa Valley, many wineries are supplementing their vineyard holdings by purchasing

acres elsewhere in California—especially along the Central Coast, which has become a renowned Chardonnay region in its own right.

One example of this trend is Byron Vineyard & Winery in the Santa Maria Valley, which was purchased by Robert Mondavi Winery of Napa. Winemaker Byron "Kim" Brown is one of the standard bearers for Chardonnay from this region. He observes, "The Chardonnay from the Byron Estate Vineyard tends to produce wines with intense aromatics and flavor profiles of green apple, pear, and hazelnut."

Neatly, at Cambria Winery & Vineyard, new winemaker Fred Holloway is carrying on the tradition established by his predecessor, Dave Gully, of consistently high scores and praise for the Katherine's Vineyard Chardonnay. He says, "The number one reason why our Santa Maria Bench Chardonnay is different is the climate. Coastal influences and constant, moderate temperatures give us an extremely long growing season."

Katherine's Vineyard Chardonnay employs the time-honored method of malolactic fermentation, a French invention appropriated by most California Chardonnay producers. This technique is a secondary fermentation which converts malic acid to lactic acid, and in so doing softens the texture of the wine.

Another leading Central Coast Chardonnay producer is Meridian Vineyards, which burst onto the market in 1988 with its colorful label designed by winemaker Chuck Ortmann. "What brought me here and what keeps me excited is the quality of our vineyards in Santa Barbara, Edna Valley, and Paso Robles," says Chuck. "To work with these vineyards year in and year out has been a very rewarding experience."

Just over the hill, in the heart of the Santa Ynez Valley, Foley Estates Vineyard & Winery was recently named "Best Producer of Chardonnay" by the World Wine Championships. Winemaker Alan Phillips produces three Chardonnays, which he says stand out "because the grapes are grown in the right area."

Most California Chardonnays receive some barrel aging, a few months to one year. The best can benefit from a year or two of bottle aging after purchase, and some even for six to 10 years—but the vast majority of California Chardonnays on the shelves are ready to drink now. Why not pour a glass with dinner this evening? Whether you're serving seafood, chicken, pasta, or pork, California Chardonnay is truly the wise for all seasons.

Evelyn Kott is a wine writer and wine country tour guide based in Santa Barbara, California.



Chardonnays To Sample

GIGICH HILLS
1996 Chardonnay
Bright yellow-gold color with spicy, fruity aroma. Appealing flavors of ripe apples and toasty oak. \$33.00



COTTONWOOD CANYON
1994 Barrel Select Chardonnay
Starts with an initial aroma and taste of coconut honey, and follows with a creamy, lush texture. \$29.00



SEQUOIA GROVE
1997 Estate Reserve Chardonnay
From the magnificent Estate Vineyard which produces this deep, rich Meritage-like Chardonnay. \$22.00



BERINGER VINEYARDS
1997 Napa Valley Chardonnay
With aromas of pineapple, apple and pear, this oak barrel fermented wine has complementing flavors of citrus and butter. \$36.00



CUVAISON
1997 Napa Valley/Carreras Chardonnay
A versatile Chardonnay with lemon, honey and tropical fruit aromas and soft, creamy, peach, lemon and vanilla flavors. \$19.95



CHATEAU ST. JEAN
1996 Robert Young Chardonnay
Tropical fruits mix with honey and smoky aromas while the flavor blends creamy nectarine, pineapple and floral. \$24.00



