

# My Favorite California Chardonnays

Chardonnays can range from acidic to buttery. These 13 strike the perfect balance.

By ED SCHWARTZ

CHARDONNAY GRAPES MAKE A DELICATE-TASTING WINE, BUT THE actual flavor can vary greatly depending on many elements—some of which are dictated by the winemaker.

*Terroir*, or the growing conditions in the vineyard, greatly affect chardonnay. In cooler climates—like the Burgundy region in France and the northern coastal regions of California—the wines tend to be very crisp and acidic, with tart citrus flavors.

Barrel aging greatly affects the taste of chardonnay, as do the particulars of the barreling. There are French oak barrels (the gold standard), oak barrels from other countries, new oak versus previously used oak, the length of time the wine stays in the barrels, and the degree of toast the barrel is given.

Another major factor is whether the wine is put through malolactic—or secondary—fermentation. In malolactic fermentation, the young wine is inoculated with bacteria that changes malic acid (which produces the green apple taste) to lactic acid (which produces a creamy, buttery taste).

I like well-balanced wines: wines that have it all, but in subtle amounts. Here are some of my favorite California chardonnays:

**2012 Buena Vista Carmenero, \$20:** Racy and lemony, with a very long finish. I kept going back to this exciting wine at the recent grand opening of the Buena Vista Museum.

**2013 Cakebread Cellars, \$36.50:** Apple and pear aromas, with melon and minerality galore and subtle-but-spicy oak.

**2013 Calera, \$36:** Limestone-rich soil gives this wine a unique character—very bright with a hint of pepper. One of the most highly rated chardonnays of this vintage.

**2013 Chalk Hill, \$42:** Big all around, with good oak and great fruit. This style would please most chardonnay sippers who like assertive wines.

**2012 Chateau Montelena, \$50:** Always one of the great chardonnays—complex fruit flavors with intensity and grace.

**2012 De Loach, \$18:** Lime and soft peach flavors with delicious apple over-

tones and just a hint of oak. A wonderfully balanced wine.

**2013 Far Niente, \$45:** Deeply concentrated, well balanced and rich. Always at the top rung of California chardonnays and one of the best for aging.

**2012 Grgich Hills Estate, \$42:** This great house has always produced benchmark chardonnays from the masterful hand of **Mike Grgich**. He made the chardonnay that came in first at the 1976 Paris tasting.

**2012 Joseph Phelps Freestone Vineyard, \$55:** Lots of wonderful lemon and tangerine flavors. Not at all heavy, but clean, focused, and a pure expression of cool-weather chardonnay.

**2013 Kistler Dutton Ranch, \$120:** For many years, Kistler has been at the forefront of great California chardonnays. Very rich in fruit flavors, 100 percent malolactic fermentation for creaminess, and fine oak, too. In every way, a powerful, assertive wine.

**2012 Mer Soleil Reserve, \$30:** Rich and complex wine with wonderful components ranging from lovely fruit to nuanced oak. This wine is surely in the big, bold style.

**2012 Patz & Hall Zio Tony Ranch, \$65:** Expansive, lush and vibrant. There are

many times when I sense this is my favorite chardonnay. I cannot just sip this wine. I also love the sensational Patz & Hall Sonoma Coast blend (\$38)—very crisp, mineral-y and spicy.

**2012 Talbott Sleepy Hollow Vineyard, \$42:** This highly regarded wine strikes a nice balance between rich mouth feel and crisp acidity, along with wonderful minerality and a lasting finish.



CONTINUED ON PAGE 10

## THE HISTORY OF CALIFORNIA CHARDONNAYS

The story of chardonnay in California begins with the Wente Family. In 1912, Ernest Wente, the son of winery founder C.H. Wente, first proposed importing chardonnay cuttings from France's University of Montpellier. These cuttings were planted in Livermore Valley.

Over the next decades, the Wente family chose the best clones from those original plantings and created the seminal Wente clone. In 1936, Ernest Wente offered America's first varietally labeled chardonnay. Today, the company produces four different styles of chardonnay.

**In 1976, the chardonnay from Napa's Chateau Montelena came in first at the famous Paris tasting.**

After World War II, the great San Francisco business leader and philanthropist I.D. Zellerbach was asked by President Harry Truman to help implement the Marshall Plan. Zellerbach's visits to Europe sparked his great interest in wines, especially those of Burgundy. In 1953, he planted chardonnay and pinot noir vines on a property he owned in Sonoma County, and built a beautiful winery modeled on the famed Clos de Vougeot. He named it Hanzell, and its great success led many other wineries to adapt Hanzell's use of French oak barrels and malolactic fermentation—among other innovations.

The biggest milestone for California chardonnay occurred in 1976, when the 1973 chardonnay from Napa's Chateau Montelena came in first over many great French Burgundies at the famous Paris tasting. This estimable wine was made by **Mike Grgich**, and the event turned the wine world on its nose.

Grgich is still making great wine with his business partner, **Austin Hills**. And there are now about 100,000 acres of chardonnay planted in California. ■

Ed Schwartz began his career in wine promotion at New York's "21" Club. As his interest in wine grew, he moved west to be closer to the grapes. Ed has written more than 500 published articles on wine, food and travel.