

What You Need to Know About California White Wines

Yes, there's a lot of great California Chardonnay. But if you aren't thinking about its other grapes, you're really missing out.

by Virginia Boone - March 2024

California is the world's fourth-largest wine producer—trailing only Italy, France and Spain—and you can probably guess the white grape whose acreage and production tops all others in the state: Chardonnay. But it wasn't always this way.

For decades, Chardonnay's cultivation in California substantially trailed French Colombard, Chenin Blanc, and Riesling. Despite Charles Wetmore's 1882 plantings of Chardonnay in the Livermore Valley, followed by the Wente family's cultivation of Chardonnay cuttings from France in the early 1900s, Chardonnay was nearly unheard of in California until 1953, when Hanzell Vineyards planted Chardonnay vines (from Wente cuttings) in the Sonoma Valley. Strange as it may seem, back then there were fewer than 100 acres of Chardonnay planted in North America.

In the '60s and '70s, the Sangiacomo family, Warren Dutton, and Larry Hyde planted Chardonnay in Carneros and the Russian River Valley, and soon made it famous, selling their grapes to the likes of Aubert, Kongsgaard, Kistler, and Ramey. Suddenly everyone took note. Today, the state has more than 87,000 acres of Chardonnay vines.

California's myriad microclimates, and Chardonnay's chameleon-like ability to reflect those climates, means there are a lot of different versions of it, some forgettable, some sublime. In the right hands, California Chardonnay is one of the great wines of the world. (Please don't get stuck in an Anything But Chardonnay mind loop. That nonsense is older than an iPod.)

Third in acreage—after French Colombard, which really doesn't go into any wines of note—but definitely second in importance is Sauvignon Blanc. Robert Mondavi Winery has some of the oldest vine cuttings in California within its I Block section of Oakville's To Kalon Vineyard, planted in the 1940s. The grape's earliest days in the state can also be traced back to Wetmore and the Livermore Valley of the 1880s, though few will dispute its true homes are in the Napa Valley and Sonoma County.

Most California producers have looked to Bordeaux and the Loire Valley for inspiration, opting to make richer, more complex versions from grapes grown in the right places than compete on acidity and intense grapefruit aromatics. Of course, some California Sauvignon Blanc is best left on the shelf. Know your producers. Better yet, know your appellations and vineyards.

After that, the most commonly planted California whites are Pinot Gris/Grigio (15,000 acres), Riesling (2,944 acres) and Viognier (2,477 acres), which is often blended with other Rhône grapes like Grenache Blanc (581 acres), Roussanne (312), Marsanne (104), and/or Grenache Gris (not enough to count).

And don't forget Chenin Blanc (3,775 acres), a once-common grape in California. Through the 1970s, Chenin was still the second-most planted white grape in the state, though mostly used for blending into a wine then labeled "Chablis," or making fairly sweet, insipid wines that nobody really cared about. (Notable exceptions: Chenin bottlings from Chappellet and Inglenook.) A few producers have old-vine Chenin—notably Chalone, in Monterey County, which has plantings dating back to 1919. Today, a loyal coterie of small producers do a good job with Chenin, typically by looking to the Loire Valley for inspiration.

California Sauvignon Blanc

Napa Valley and Sonoma County excel at growing this Bordelaise white, sometimes with Sémillon, sometimes not; sometimes barrel-fermented, sometimes not. Vineyard designation is less of a thing with Sauvignon Blanc than it is with Chardonnay, so following a producer's style is more the way to go.

Napa Valley and Sonoma County grow nearly the same amount of Sauvignon Blanc. But anyone making Sauvignon Blanc in Napa will tell you that it's an endangered species, as those vines often get pulled out to make room for a more lucrative crop: Cabernet Sauvignon.

This scarcity, and producers' tendency to put as much work (and oak barrels) into a Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc as they do with a Napa Cabernet can make the wines fairly pricey. Lail's Georgia Sauvignon Blanc, a beautiful wine made by Philippe Melka, sells for about \$170. It's not the only Napa Sauvignon Blanc you'll find at that price point.

In Sonoma County, Dry Creek Valley remains Sauvignon Blanc's most important home, though there are lovely plots of SB in Russian River Valley and elsewhere. Napa's versions tend to look to Bordeaux for inspiration, with barrel impact and richness at their core. Sonoma's inspiration comes more often from Sancerre, which dials up acidity and mineral-like components in lieu of upfront oak. The average price of a top Sonoma County Sauvignon Blanc is also lower, and generally between \$40 and \$60.

Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc Musts

Adamvs; Aileron; Arkenstone; Clif Family; Cliff Lede; Gamble; Grieve Family; Groth; Hourglass; J.H. Wheeler; La Pelle; Lail; **Larkmead**; Quintessa's Illumination; Realm; Rudd; Spottswoode; Vineyard 29. And never sleep on Massican's Napa Valley sleek Sauvignon Blanc, made in a crisp, low-intensity style.