

California Chenin Blanc Revival

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Larkmead winemaker Avery Heelan made the top Chenin in this report, both rich and fresh, with a complex flavor profile. (Leigh-Ann Beverley/Bonafide)

On a Saturday in May 2025, hundreds of wine lovers gathered together at Hammerling Winery in a funky Berkeley, California, warehouse district. It was the first annual “Hella Chenin,” a festival dedicated to celebrating wines made from [Chenin Blanc](#).

Yes, Chenin Blanc. Event founder Peter Andrews explains, “Interestingly, some winemakers worried the festival would feel redundant with just one variety. Yet, after 75-plus wines, the most consistent feedback was excitement that a single grape variety could command such prolonged attention without fatigue.”

The appeal of Chenin Blanc is that it is both versatile and transparent. It can yield a substantial crop and be made in a spectrum of styles. It can be lean and bracing, nuanced and fuller-bodied, expressed in sweet or sparkling versions—and more. It also has the ability to translate a vineyard’s *terroir*, especially in older vines.

Chenin’s spiritual home is France’s Loire Valley and it is the signature white varietal of South Africa. But it has a complicated history in California. Widely planted in the 1970s and ’80s, back then it was typically used for generic blends and jug wines. In the shadow of Chardonnay’s popularity, its presence (and plantings) were scaled back for decades.

Meanwhile, there have always been advocates for Chenin in the Golden State. Dry Creek Vineyards, Napa’s Chappellet and Chalone come to mind, as does Pine Ridge with its delightful Chenin-Viognier blend.

Today, the ranks of California Chenin Blanc torchbearers are growing.

“It is very exciting to be solely focused on a variety that everyone is suddenly talking about,” explains Rococo’s Natalie Brown. Her brand concentrates on making Chenin grown from as many soil types as possible. “I used to show up to accounts to have them say, ‘What am I going to do with a Chenin Blanc?’ Now I hear them say, ‘I need a Chenin on my list.’”

Brown believes the newfound attention has been a snowball effect, started by a handful of small producers who proved the potential of the grape and by the retailers who championed them.

“The story of Chenin Blanc in California has slowly been retold through several of the old vineyards that still exist, which anchors it into the state’s winegrowing history. On the quality side, I think the grape has broad appeal to a wide wine-drinking audience. It strikes a great balance of having complexity while being nuanced and is almost always very approachable,” she adds.

Hartford Court winemaker Tiaan Lordan, originally from South Africa, focuses on old vines. “Older vineyards result in a more balanced crop. There is less fruit, smaller clusters, and they seem to be more concentrated,” he explains. His winemaking is minimal, whole-bunch press, native ferments and neutral barrels, a style that is popular among California vintners.

He adds that the grape is both different enough but also close enough to modern Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc wines—a chameleon grape that can be enjoyed by everyone.

Furthermore, as Hella Chenin demonstrates, Chenin Blanc is also *cool*. “It truly hits at the core of what makes wine special. Its ability to draw people in, hold their attention and remain inviting rather than intimidating,” suggests Andrews.

MaryAnn Worobiec’s Recommended California Chenin Blancs

Larkmead

2023 Chenin Blanc Napa Valley

93 points

There’s a lovely mix of richness and freshness, with a lanolin-tinged core of baked peach, marmalade, beeswax and lemon balm flavors. Fennel pollen, grilled lemon and honeysuckle aromatics are backed up by sleek, vibrant and mouthwatering acidity.

Drink now. 107 cases made.

