

A New Light in Napa: The Quiet Ascent of White Wines

May 1, 2026 - By Ryan Montgomery

Sauvignon Blanc in Napa now spans a wide stylistic spectrum. On one end are lean, taut, reductive expressions driven by acidity, vessel choice and careful handling of aromatics. On the other are more generous, rounded wines that retain freshness and purity. Both styles are compelling – and both are executed at a high level.

Among the more mineral, reductive examples, Rudd and Quintessa stand out. Natalie Bath at Rudd and Rebekah Wineburg at Quintessa are crafting vibrant wines using a mix of stainless steel, concrete, and ceramic vessels, often incorporating sauvignon gris and semillon. Early-picked semillon adds texture without sacrificing freshness, contributing to wines that sit at the upper echelon of Napa sauvignon blanc – serious, structured, and not designed for casual drinking. At the richer end of the spectrum, Napa continues to produce textured, oak-influenced sauvignon blancs that offer a more classical expression. These wines, often aged in high-quality French oak and supported by lees work, emphasize weight and depth without sacrificing balance.

Chardonnay in Napa mirrors this diversity of style, with both ends of the spectrum increasingly focused on refinement and site expression. Vineyard location remains a defining factor. Site variation plays a critical role. Chardonnay shows temperament and variation, where its growth significantly impacts the outcome.

Beyond sauvignon blanc and chardonnay, Napa's white wine landscape becomes even more intriguing. Some of the most compelling bottles are found off the main roads, in hillside vineyards and lesser-known corners of the valley.

Chenin blanc also deserves attention. John and Reed of Lang & Reed produce distinctive, ageworthy examples that combine freshness with accessibility. During a recent tasting at Ballentine during Premiere Napa Valley, alongside Frank Ballentine and **Avery Heelan from Larkmead**, the range of chenin on display showcased diversity, freshness and accessibility, all at modest prices.

Taken together, these wines challenge the notion that Napa is defined solely by high prices, limited access, or a narrow focus on sauvignon blanc and chardonnay. From benchmark estates like Futo and Hyde de Villaine to historic sites such as Stony Hill and Haynes, and from vognier to riesling and chenin blanc, Napa offers a wide spectrum of styles, price points, and expressions.

The main takeaway for Napa whites when buying in 2026? The 2023 and 2024 whites are improving in quality and freshness, offering plenty of great value and styles for everyone. While approaching Napa with an open mind, I have found that the depth and diversity become more evident. These are wines shaped by site, thoughtful farming and a growing awareness of balance and restraint by producers and winemakers.

The shift is real – and it makes Napa worth exploring not just for its iconic reds, but for its increasingly compelling whites.



Avery Heelan of Larkmead winery, seen here in Larkmead's newly planted experimental vineyard, aims for fresh and accessible chenin blancs.