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Chardonnay's new charms

By Esther Mobley

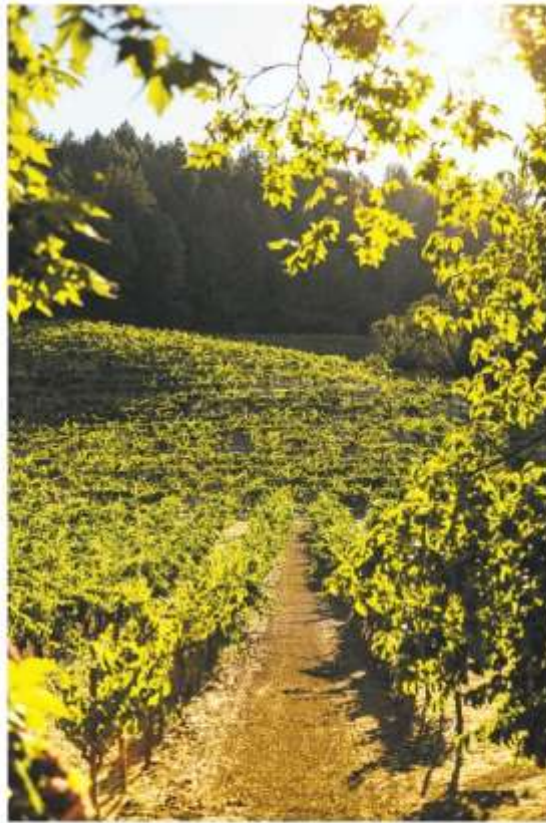
The most-planted grape variety in California is also its most versatile. Like a blank slate, Chardonnay, the great white grape of Burgundy, lacks a strong character of its own, infinitely malleable by its maker. Plantings can thrive in warm and cool climates alike, and winemaking practices such as oak treatment, malolactic fermentation and battonage (the stirring of the lees, or dead yeast cells, during barrel aging) can drastically alter a wine's character. Just about every coastal region in the state does brisk Chardonnay business.

Chardonnay's history in the Golden State has various stylistic chapters. The first wave of producers, in the mid-20th century — Hanzell, Stony Hill, Mayacamas and Mount Eden — often made wines that were lean and crisp: fermented in steel, without malolactic conversion. Absent modern technology (like temperature control), these decisions may have had as much to do with ensuring chemical stability in the wine as they did with style.

As technology advanced, some vintners introduced winemaking practices more clearly inspired by Burgundy. Fermentations in barrel, malolactic conversion, sur lie aging and battonage, and large proportions of new oak all produced wines that were, like those of Burgundy's famous vineyard Le Montrachet, rich and buttery.

If you've considered yourself part of the ABC (Anything But Chardonnay) club, it's possibly because you've had examples of Chardonnay in that rich style, tasting of vanilla and buttered popcorn. Certainly, the popularity of that style over recent decades has produced plenty of wines that veered too far beyond Burgundian ideals: over-oaked, excessively high in alcohol, often carrying residual sugar.

But contemporary California's spectrum of Chardonnay is exciting. There are many examples of rich, barrel-fermented, sur lie-aged Chardonnays done extremely well, their richness in beautiful tension with nervy acidity. There are likewise many excellent bottlings of wines that see no oak, or only neutral oak; did not undergo malolactic; and taste juicy, crunchy and tart. Chardonnay can do it all.



The vineyards at Stony Hill produce a timeless, mineral-driven Chardonnay fermented in neutral oak.



Meet The Press

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Major California regions:

Sonoma, Mendocino, Napa, Monterey and Santa Barbara counties and sub-AVAs; Central Valley

Characteristic flavors: Green apple, lemon, fig, butter, vanilla, butterscotch, brioche, hazelnut

Term to know: Malolactic fermentation (also known as "ML" or "malo")

All wine undergoes a primary fermentation, in which sugar converts to alcohol. Most wine also undergoes a secondary fermentation, called malolactic fermentation, in which the wine's tart, sharp, apple-y malic acid (like *malum*, Latin for apple) converts into creamy, rich lactic acid (like *lactis*, Latin for milk). The process also produces the compound diacetyl, which tastes and smells just like buttered popcorn.

All red wine undergoes malolactic fermentation; some whites do. A winemaker can choose to arrest the process, retaining the malic acid, or to allow (or even encourage) the conversion. It's one of several winemaking decisions that determines whether a Chardonnay will turn out lean or rich.

Tour the Chardonnay style spectrum

From lean and steely to rich and buttery, California does Chardonnay every way.

The best way to explore Chardonnay's vast potential is to visit wineries that interpret the grape differently. Start off at Stony Hill in St. Helena, where the wines see only neutral oak and never undergo malolactic fermentation; then visit Hanzell, whose flagship Chardonnay sees some (though not much) new oak and a very controlled malo. It's an example of how restrained a Chardonnay can be while still embracing some degree of richness. Taste the era-defining version from Mike Grgich, whose Chardonnay helped put Napa on the global wine map; the plush, supremely balanced bottlings at the Donum Estate; and the unapologetic, all-out butter bombs at La Crema.

STONY HILL VINEYARD

Stony Hill has long distinguished itself for its unconventional Chardonnays, and its style is timeless: mineral-driven, firmly structured, tense yet still generous. The Spring Mountain property's vines are old by California standards, averaging 30 years. All Stony Hill Chardonnay is fermented in barrel, but the barrels are never new — most are decades old.

3331 Saint Helena Hwy., St. Helena. www.stonyhillvineyard.com

HANZELL VINEYARDS

In the 1960s, Hanzell winemaker Brad Webb introduced important innovations to the craft of California Chardonnay: fermenting wine in stainless steel tanks; using inert gases to control malolactic bacteria and oxidation. He was also among the first to use smaller French oak barrels for Chardonnay. The soul of Hanzell is its Sonoma Valley estate Chardonnay, quietly rich, using only 25% new oak. It isn't cheap, which is why you should also taste their entry-level Chardonnay, called Sebella. It's more minimalist, aged in neutral oak, from the property's younger vines.

18596 Lamita Ave., Sonoma. www.hanzell.com

GRGICH HILLS ESTATE

Chardonnay is what made Mike Grgich famous, when his 1973 Chateau Montelena Chardonnay won the Judgment of Paris tasting. The grape remains a focus of his own Grgich Hills Estate in Rutherford, with several different bottlings. The Napa Valley Chardonnay is crisp, as malolactic fermentation was blocked; the Miljenko's Selection, fermented in 900-gallon oak casks, is rounder and more honeyed.

1829 St. Helena Hwy., Rutherford. www.grgich.com

THE DONUM ESTATE

The Donum Estate has a world-class art collection, with sculptures by Ai Weiwei, Fernando Botero and Richard Hudson — and more on the way. Donum is also producing some of the most nuanced Chardonnay in Carneros. Fermented in barrels, 40 percent of them new, with plenty of lees-stirring during the aging process, the resulting wine is saline and citrusy, with an almond-touched richness on the finish.

24500 Ramal Rd., Sonoma. www.thedonumestate.com

LA CREMA

If you've ever shopped at Safeway, you're doubtless familiar with the ubiquitous La Crema label (though it's still not quite as popular, nor quite as cheap, as its parent company's best-selling Chardonnay, Kendall-Jackson). As of last summer, La Crema has added a new alternative to its downtown Healdsburg tasting room: the Saralee's Vineyard property. Saralee and Richard Kunde's longtime home, sold to Jackson Family in 2012, has been renovated into a country mansion, a scenic spot where visitors can repose while sampling La Crema's sybaritic, butter-forward Chardonnays.

3575 Slusser Rd., Windsor. www.lacrema.com