

Vintners showcase Chardonnay at its best

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It has become so fashionable to beat up Chardonnay that, really, the fun is gone.

I'm not just talking drinkers' drumbeat of ABC - "anything but Chardonnay" - or the persistent mediocrity of most Chardonnays I encounter in the course of trying to find a worthy handful. I'm talking about a deep cultural dissonance between those who swoon at the word "oaky" and those who think it's a four-letter word.

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- [Vintners showcase Chardonnay at its best](#)
- [Matt Lickliger and Kevin O'Connor: Mission: To highlight the potential of extraordinary Chardonnay vineyards](#)
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- [Bob and Jim Varner: Mission: To grow perfect Chardonnay fruit, then leave it be](#)
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- [Chardonnay pairing recipe](#)

Granted, there's plenty not to like. California Chardonnay has long been a magnet for mockery. There's its formulaic demeanor: tropical fruit flavors to make Carmen Miranda blush, matched with enough oak (via actual barrels or a slew of wood "alternatives") to overwhelm our palates with toast and coconut and vanilla. That might all be OK if not for the typical lack of balance: All those pineapple and guava notes come from fruit that stands on the edge of overripeness, often from too-

warm vineyard sites. Add in the all-but-mandatory buttery profile that comes from overexuberant malolactic fermentation, and that exotic fruit becomes flabby and dull. Carmen would not approve.

All that may be so, and the varietal may remain a perennial punch line - entire personality tests could be built around how you respond to the phrase "sitting in Berkeley, sipping a glass of Chardonnay" - but like the Cheesecake Factory, it's also immensely popular. Chardonnay remains Americans' top varietal wine by far, according to the Nielsen Co., to the tune of \$1.75 billion a year.

The cultural gap lies in the fact that there are really two Chardonnays. As one of the most malleable grapes around, it can make wines of character - grown in sites that struggle to ripen fruit, made in powerhouse styles that define an impressive, truly homegrown style of Chardonnay: ageworthy, opulent, edgy.

Then there is supermarket Chardonnay, a confected and mass-produced drink that frankly is responsible for the overwhelming share of that popularity. The two share a name, but as winemaker John Kongsgaard, who has devoted his career to extraordinary Chardonnay, suggests: "It's a completely different beverage at that level. The genome is the same, but that's where it stops."

Neither is inherently bad. But too often \$30 Chardonnay with all the benefit of new French barrels and top-notch fruit tastes like its \$8 counterparts. These incarnations seem a long way from the drink John Melville rhapsodized in his 1968 "Guide to California Wines" as "fragrant, flavorful and smooth, reminiscent of still Champagne."

Partly to blame is what winemaker Kevin Kelley calls a "perfect storm": Starting when Hanzell Vineyards imported new French oak barrels, wineries mimicked the way wine was made in Chardonnay's old home of Burgundy. The key components - oak, plus stirring the lees (leftover yeast and grape material) to add body, plus unhindered malolactic fermentation to soften the texture - were a hit. If some was

good, more was a runaway hit. Just one problem: These methods were intended for the finest, most low-yielding grapes. Most fruit wasn't so good. "That," Kongsgaard points out, "is how you get the vulgarity of the technique."

Finally, don't forget what I'll call the Kendall-Jackson factor - that hint of residual sweetness that keeps the average Chardonnay drinker coming back for more.

Though the very notion of California Chardonnay has become pastiche, plenty of winemakers still take it seriously, willingly rethinking the formula. Rather than wallow in a sea of oak and butter, I sought out three wineries that express Chardonnay at its best.

You'll notice that Burgundy looms large in their minds, but none would tolerate having their wines labeled by that misguided sobriquet, "Burgundian." They understand that they're creating American originals, which means winemaking that's never programmatic.

A quick caveat: Their wines are not inexpensive. They work with difficult vineyards that yield powerful fruit in tiny amounts. There are no economies of scale.

Yet two, Lioco and Varner, also make basic, unoaked Chardonnays that cost \$20 or less. In vintner Jim Varner's words, "the raw material's different," and the wines offer clean expressions of Chardonnay without makeup.

So let's declare the hatefest over. Out in the wilderness, great Chardonnay lurks.

More powerhouse producers

Alma Rosa: Richard Sanford's fans know the Sta. Rita Hills vintner's Chardonnay work from his Sanford label. Those talents have resurfaced in his single-vineyard Jabali Chardonnay.

Au Bon Climat: Pinot Noir formed the core of Jim Clendenen's reputation, but his single-site Chardonnays show expression and a food-friendly edge that harks back to the pre-butter days.

HdV: The best of Larry Hyde's nonpareil Carneros Chardonnay fruit gets eloquent treatment from winemaker Stephane Vivier.

Mayacamas: Mount Veeder isn't the most obvious Chardonnay territory, but Bob Travers and his son Chris tailor their bottlings for aging. Their low-yielding fruit makes powerful, well-textured wine.

Mount Eden Vineyards: Harnessing the extraordinary soils of the old Martin Ray property in the Santa Cruz Mountains, Jeffrey and Ellie Patterson continue to grow some of California's most commanding, age-worthy Chardonnay.

Ramey Wine Cellars: David Ramey puts his winemaking talents to top fruit from the Hyde (see above) and Hudson vineyards, among others, to produce big, complex wines.

Ridge Vineyards: Though Paul Draper would rather talk about Zinfandel, the winery's (barely) hidden talent is with consistently outstanding Chardonnay from its Monte Bello estate.