

THE POUR

12 Reasons to Love California Chardonnay

The wines have evolved, but the negative stereotypes linger. These diverse bottles will challenge what you think you know.



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These bottles reflect a style of California chardonnay that prizes freshness and finesse. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times



By Eric Asimov

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For longer than I can remember, California chardonnay has been a wine that many discerning consumers love to hate. It is by far [the most popular white grape](#) grown in California, with about 90,000 acres planted in 2021, dwarfing runners-up like sauvignon blanc, pinot gris and colombard, with about 16,000 acres each.

What accounts for this discrepancy? It has far more to do with chardonnay's image than with California chardonnay itself. It's still an easy-to-remember synonym for white wine in supermarkets, restaurants and bars, which makes up a significant portion of the wine's popularity.

Through the 1990s, California chardonnay was the focal point of a stylistic divide. Mainstream critics of the time lauded voluptuous, oaky, flamboyant wines, both red and white, which became the dominant styles in California. That gave rise to a counter movement, favoring more restrained and subtle wines.

The most vocal component of this counter movement came to be summarized as “Anything but Chardonnay,” or ABC, even as it applied in principle to overdone wines of all sorts.

Those battles seem long over. For the last 15 years, the pendulum has swung in the other direction. Wines around the world have become far less extravagant, aiming instead for freshness and finesse. This has [absolutely happened with California chardonnay](#).

You can still find the older lush, full-blown style, and a lot of people still like it. But it’s no longer the prevailing style. These days, many chardonnay producers are aiming for grace rather than for power.

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I recently went shopping for California chardonnays that reflect this new reality. I’ve never been a fan of the bombastic style, so I did not try to find them. Instead, I picked a dozen bottles, ranging from \$20 to \$100, that reflect a more incisive, energetic approach.

The wines come from some of the top regions for California chardonnay, like the Sonoma Coast, the Santa Cruz Mountains and the Santa Rita Hills of Santa Barbara County.

But they also come from some unexpected places, like Calaveras County southeast of Sacramento and the heart of Napa Valley, where much of the chardonnay has given way to cabernet sauvignon, which fetches higher prices.

It's important to understand that these are not the 12 best California chardonnays. They are simply 12 bottles that I found in New York retail shops at a variety of prices and that I don't hesitate to recommend.

I still hear a lot of the stereotypical criticisms of California chardonnay. People tell me, "I hate oak," or "I don't like the taste of butter in wine."

I don't like oaky, buttery wines either. But it's past time to stop thinking that these descriptions capture California chardonnay. Any of these 12 bottles, listed in order of price, will offer an entirely different perspective.



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

**Matthiasson Napa Valley Linda Vista Vineyard Chardonnay 2020,
12 percent, \$32**

I've been a fan of Matthiasson almost from its inception in 2003. Its tense, energetic wines then stood out stylistically from the California mainstream. Nowadays, as California styles have diversified, the Matthiasson wines are far more appreciated. But they still stand out for their consistent quality. This chardonnay is vivacious and alive, not particularly complex but delightfully fresh and energetic.