



WINE ENTHUSIAST
MAGAZINE

SONOMA CHARDONNAY COMES ALIVE

Patient and tenacious winemakers who stood by the grape are seeing the fruits of their labor.

California Chardonnay is in a good place right now. It has burst forth from a long, controversial period where it was cocooned in a reputation of buttery vapor or worse.

During those dark days of derision, not everyone abandoned hope, however. Least of all those producers who are really good at working with the grape. Their tenacity is a gift. Beauty cannot forever be denied, and now, California Chardonnay, specifically from Sonoma, is finally having its moment.

"The average consumer is starting to realize that California Chardonnay does not have to be buttery, oaky and sweet," says Pete Soergel, winemaker at Lynmar Estate. "In Sonoma, we can produce Chardonnay with cleaner, brighter profiles, too. Collectively, our region is expanding the definition of what great Chardonnay can really taste like. I'm really excited by the evolution of Sonoma Chardonnay and its continued potential."



BY
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PHOTOS BY
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In the Beginning...

Historian Charles Sullivan credits Wente Vineyards, then known as Wente Bros., in Livermore as California's first producer of Chardonnay in 1936. Confusingly, it was labeled Pinot Chardonnay.

Twenty-four years earlier, the Wentes brought cuttings from France and developed what's now called the Wente Clone. It's estimated that 75% of California Chardonnay is derived from this clone.

In Sonoma County, Hanzell's 1953 Ambassador's Vineyard is thought to contain the oldest New World Chardonnay vines. The original three acres are still on St. George rootstock, derived from the Wente clone. When it was planted, there were fewer than 100 acres devoted to the variety statewide. Today, it accounts for more than 93,000 acres.

Hanzell Vineyards was the first to use imported French oak barrels exclusively to age its wines, rather than the large vessels often made from redwood that were the norm at the time. This had a profound influence on the grape's future trajectory. French oak is now used prominently by most California producers.

Still, nothing catapulted modern-day California Chardonnay quite like Napa Valley-based Chateau Montelena when its bottle was named the top white wine at the 1976 "Judgment of Paris." That 40% of its grapes were actually sourced from Russian River Valley winegrowers Helen and Charles Bacigalupi gave Sonoma new hope.

The Bacigalupis began to plant in 1964, the same year Warren and Gail Dutton bought their first piece of land in the cooler climes of what's now the Green Valley appellation of the Russian River Valley. The Duttons planted their Chardonnay in 1967. Around this time, Joe Rochioli Jr. also started to plant Chardonnay in the Russian River Valley.

Fast forward to 1989. In the woods above Occidental, on a cool-climate 1,200-foot ridge, Warren Dutton planted the first vines of the B.A. Thieriot Vineyard. Those grapes would eventually go to Littorai and Williams-Selyem, among others.

Other Russian River Valley pioneers include Davis Bynum, Gary Farrell, the Martinelli family, Dehlinger, Lynmar, Hartford Court, Aubert, Ramey, Ritchie Vineyard and Kistler. On the true Sonoma Coast, Hirsch started to plant in 1980, as did Marcassin and Flowers 11 years later.



95 Gary Farrell 2018 Russian River Selection Chardonnay (Russian River Valley). This wine offers such tremendous value and quality, it should be on everyone's go-to list for Russian River Valley Chardonnay. Lime, fig and grapefruit rind flavors ride along a lifted character of crushed stone texture and bright acidity. It's impressive from the detailed start to the lengthy finish. *Editors' Choice.*

abv: 13.3%

Price: \$35