

## The Ten Most Wanted Chardonnays

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Not many grape varieties are as divisive as Chardonnay.

At any given moment, you're only a quick online search from a medley of listicles and articles with such descriptive titles as: 16 Reasons to Not Hate on Chardonnay, 7 Reasons to Never Drink Chardonnay Again, and even the redemptive Ladies, That Chardonnay Might be Why You're an Emotional Wreck.

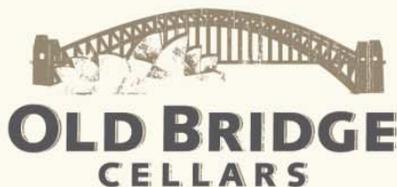
But perhaps that just comes with the territory of being one of the most popular and widely planted white wine varieties – Wine-Searcher's year-to-date searches for Chardonnay total more than one million. In context, that's hundreds of thousands more than Riesling, the second most-popular white grape variety (but perhaps the only variety more polarizing), while it's also double the searches for Sauvignon Blanc and quadruple those combined for Pinot Gris and Pinot Grigio.

Of course, there are two regions whose Chardonnay expressions are universally celebrated, especially by those who don't know that it's Chardonnay they're drinking – Burgundy and Champagne. So we've excluded those regions to compile a list of the top 10 most popular Chardonnay wines. That way we're only looking at searches where we can be confident the user is specifically after Chardonnay ... and also because without that caveat, Blanc de Blancs and white Burgundy would be the only wines on our list.

Instead, we've found our top 10 is composed almost entirely of the who's who of California Chardonnay producers, toting some high critical acclaim, a range of prices and hailing mostly from Napa Valley, with only a couple of wines from Sonoma. The two non-California exceptions are a major Italian label and a pioneering Australian estate.

A pair of notes for context before the list: across those million plus searches for Chardonnay, the top wine on our list only accounts for 8916 of them. Compare that to Sauvignon Blanc, which has less than half of Chardonnay's searches, but the top wine, Cloudy Bay Sauvignon Blanc, has 14,473 on its own. While Chardonnay is very popular, its success is spread across the grape's expressions, not solely driven by a few producers.

The other interesting tidbit is that if we did include white Burgundy, our top wine would be the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti Montrachet Grand Cru, which has an average price of \$5356. For context, that's more than the price all 10 of the following Chardonnay wines combined and multiplied by three.



### **1. Leeuwin Estate Art Series Chardonnay, Margaret River**

Surprisingly the most popular non-Burgundy Chardonnay is also not from California. Leeuwin Estate was one of the founding wineries in Australia's Margaret River, a region known for high quality Chardonnay production along with the country's mainstay red varieties: Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon. What had been a cattle farm was turned into a vineyard on the advice of Robert Mondavi, who thought Chardonnay would do well there. The 1980 vintage of the Art Series, one of the earliest, was given Decanter Magazine's highest critic score, while more recently it made it on to Wine Spectators Top 100 Wines of 2015 at #76, was #5 in the 2014 list and was #33 on the 2002 list.

### **2. Rombauer Vineyards Chardonnay, Carneros**

Another recent name on Wine Spectator's Top 100, this time at #41 on the 2012 list. While Rombauer has been making Chardonnay since 1982, it only bottled Carneros Chardonnay in 1990, where a cooler climate compared to other parts of Napa Valley proved ideal for retaining acidity. As the second most searched-for wine on the list, it's also the most affordable averaging just \$36 a bottle.

### **3. Chateau Montelena Chardonnay, Napa Valley**

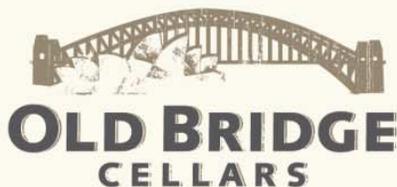
This wine was made famous when it came top in the 1976 Judgment of Paris tasting that helped ascend California wine to an international stage. As such, Chateau Montelena and the making of the 1973 Chardonnay are the subject of the 2008 movie adaptation Bottle Shock as well as its musical adaptation. While the Chardonnay was made famous from the tasting, the estate Cabernet Sauvignon is Montelena's flagship wine, popular since the 1980s when the vines were more appropriately mature.

### **4. Marcassin Estate Chardonnay, Sonoma Coast**

A 95 means this wine is tied for having the highest average critic score on the list. The Marcassin Estate Chardonnay is from the personal label of esteemed winemaker Helen Turley and her viticulturist husband John Wetlaufer. The wine boasts a whopping seven vintages with perfect 100-point scores from Robert Parker, out of a pool of only 20 reviewed vintages – and that's to say nothing of the other 13 consistently highly rated vintages. Of course, this comes with a high average price tag; at \$351 it's the most expensive wine on our list.

### **5. Gaja Gaia & Rey Chardonnay Langhe, Piedmont**

Famous for the region's more traditional variety, Nebbiolo, Gaja has since grown into a one of Italy's most prominent wine labels, expanding into, and now producing more wine from, Tuscany. Their Chardonnay comes from the Gaia & Rey vineyard, first planted in 1979 and the source of the estate's first white wines. While Chardonnay isn't a traditional variety in Piedmont, it's becoming increasingly common in the region's vineyards.



#### **6. Kistler Vineyards Kistler Chardonnay, Sonoma Valley**

Kistler has a long history of Sonoma Chardonnay, the Kistler Vineyards Chardonnay in turn being one of the estate's longest in-production wines and its flagship, first produced in 1986. The vineyard sits on a hillside above the Sonoma Valley, planted at roughly 1800 feet above sea level on the western slopes of the Mayacama mountain range. Its popularity has been steady over the years, but the winery also makes a range of Chardonnay from its various other Sonoma vineyards.

#### **7. Kongsgaard The Judge Chardonnay, Napa Valley**

This is our second wine with an average critic score of 95, tied with Marcassin's Estate Chardonnay. Kongsgaard's The Judge Chardonnay's critical acclaim is similarly bolstered by a perfect Parker score, earned by the 2013 vintage – though other vintages have near-perfect scores from the Wine Advocate as well. The top tier of Kongsgaard's Chardonnays, the wine comes from the Judge Vineyard, named in honor of owner/winemaker John Kongsgaard's father, who was a Napa Superior Court judge. The family first planted Chardonnay on their property after it was suggested as a good spot for it by their neighbor, famed winemaker Andre Tchelistcheff.

#### **8. Kongsgaard Chardonnay, Napa Valley**

Our next entry is again from Kongsgaard, but this time it's for their standard Napa Valley Chardonnay. The wine has still received considerable critical praise such as multiple appearances in the top 10 of Wine Spectators Top 100 list; most recently for the 2010 vintage, which came in fifth in 2013. While one of the criteria for choosing wines for the list is availability and value, Kongsgaard's selection caused a minor stir because its wines are all made in limited quantities and are difficult to get a hold of. The cult status of the winery has also steadily driven the bottle cost up – increasing in average price by \$20 in the last five years.

#### **9. Far Niente Winery Estate Chardonnay, Napa Valley**

Working only with Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay, Far Niente has been making Napa Valley wine since 1979, though the winery itself actually dates all the way back to the 1880s. While it didn't survive Prohibition as a commercial producer, the winery uses the same century old building and is now included on the National Register of Historic Places.

#### **10. Cakebread Cellars Chardonnay, Napa Valley**

This is the only wine on the list that's had a steady decline in its popularity over the past four years. Cakebread's Chardonnay reached a peak in monthly search rankings back in December 2012, being the 245th most searched-for wine across Wine-Searcher's database, which would have actually made it the most popular Chardonnay for the month at the time, but the label has faced more competition at its price point. It averages \$46 a bottle and is one of the cheapest wines on this list. Known for focusing business on restaurant sales, Cakebread ranked as first or second in 10 years of a Wine & Spirits magazine annual poll that asked leading US restaurants to name the wine brands that sold the most. In 2015, Cakebread dropped out of the top two spots but still landed fifth overall.