



What's Your

Chardonnay?

**A deep dive into the
shape-shifting, polarizing
grape that's America's
favorite—and most
misunderstood—variety**

**By Ray Isle
Photography by Greg DuPree**



I got my start in wine with Chardonnay.

A MILLION YEARS OR SO AGO in 1997, helping out with the harvest at a winery in the Santa Cruz Mountains. The winery's Chardonnay was emblematic of the era: ripe with apricot and tropical fruit notes, fermented and aged in new oak, buttery and almost unctuous. And yet it was also somehow zippy with citrus acidity. A recent vintage had gotten a 92-point score from a famous wine magazine, but the winemaker laughed dismissively when I asked him about it. "Of course it did! I acidified the shit out of it because I knew they'd love that. Idiots." Then he wandered off, pumping his arms like a weight lifter and grunting "fat oak, fat oak, fat oak!" Interesting guy. Safe to say I learned a lot that fall.

As the years have gone by, it's become clear to me that Chardonnay is, more than any other grape, a chameleon. It's able to express itself as an oaky, buttery wave of lushness just as easily as it can a steely, linear zap of freshness. It grows on the exalted slope of Burgundy's Côte d'Or, where at harvest each bunch is cosseted and carefully clipped by hand; it grows in the flatlands of California's Central Valley, where it's harvested by diesel-fueled agricultural machines. It lives in boxes on the bottom shelf of the supermarket, just as it lives at rarefied tastings where the bottles are smashed after the event, to prevent people from filling them with counterfeit wine. (Truly: At \$5,000 for a bottle of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti Montrachet, you'd worry about counterfeits, too.) Chardonnay can be as golden as a wedding ring, or so light as to be almost colorless; ripe with a tropical fruit salad of pineapple, mango, and guava flavors, or lean and taut and lemony-tart. Some Chardonnays can age for decades, and some die after a year. But what is Chardonnay? What's it supposed to be? People love it, but do they know what it is about Chardonnay that they love?

All of this was bothering me, so I decided to work a few days in Napa Valley and Sonoma County, pouring Chardonnay for people. And pretty quickly, I started experiencing what I'd call the Chardonnay whiplash effect. Case in point: I was in the tasting room at La Crema Estate in Sonoma's Russian River Valley, dutifully suited up in my La Crema fleece vest. I was pouring for two groups of friends, all women, at two tables. One

1961

The first documented Chardonnay vines come to Oregon and are planted at the former Hillcrest Vineyard.

group was inside, one outside on the winery porch. In my best "Of course I am not a journalist doing a story, really, I'm just a standard winery-tasting-room dude" manner, I asked the host of each table what kind of Chardonnay she liked.

Inside, Linda from Seattle said: "I'm a butter and oak gal. If you want stainless steel, drink Sauvignon Blanc!"

Outside, Rhiannon from L.A. said: "If a Chardonnay's really oaky, all I taste is butter and vanilla. I could just eat a cookie if I wanted that."

But both women agreed that the wine I'd poured for them was definitely their style of wine. It was the same bottle, of course—La Crema's 2018 Saralee's Vineyard Chardonnay. About a third of the barrels it had been aged in were new oak. (New barrels impart the most flavor to a wine.) I took the bottle back behind the tasting room counter and poured myself some. Oaky? Not oaky? I'd say that, like the classic duck-rabbit optical illusion, what each woman perceived was contingent on what she was looking for.

Still, it's pretty clear that fewer people these days are looking for oak in their Chardonnay, or for butter. For every person I served who said they liked oaky, buttery Chardonnays, at least four said they did not. Ten years ago, that split might have been fifty-fifty. Twenty years ago, it would have been completely reversed. That's true whenever I ask people about Chardonnay right now; certainly it was true at La Crema, and also at Far

Niente in Napa Valley, where I headed next.

I asked Nicole Marchesi, winemaker at Far Niente, about how it is that a wine can somehow be equally satisfying to both oak-lovers and oak-haters. She told me: "My pet theory on this is that consumers confuse flavor and texture, especially when it comes to buttery and oaky. Sometimes they'll say oaky or buttery, but what they're really talking about is the creaminess and richness in the mouth." Fair enough: Far Niente, which is a truly iconic California Chardonnay, is aged in about 45% new oak. Taste the wine and the oak is present, you can sense it, but it's not remotely obtrusive. Percentages never tell the whole story. That \$5,000 Romanée-Conti Montrachet is aged in 100% new oak, but you'd never guess it. In a way, oak is like salt in cooking—the right amount, whatever that is, accentuates the flavors of a dish; the wrong amount, too much or too little, leaves it either overtly salty or drearily flat. (Oak barrels, of course, also serve as ideal storage vessels for wine.)

What it really comes down to is balance. That's echoed by Jordan Vineyard & Winery's Maggie Kruse, who to my mind makes one of the most finely balanced Chardonnays around. "For a winemaker, it is essential to find the right barrels to complement your wines," she told me. "Finding the correct forest, grain type, and toast of a barrel can be challenging. Some barrels overpower with notes of vanilla, dill, and coconut."

Butter is a separate issue. Buttery notes in Chardonnay are unrelated to barrels; they're a byproduct of malolactic fermentation. MLF, as it's known, does what it says: converts malic acid (sharp; think green apples) to lactic acid (mellow and soft). Note that lactic acid is not lactose—milk-intolerant folks need not worry. One natural byproduct of MLF is often diacetyl,

1976

Chateau Montelena's 1973 Chardonnay triumphs against top white Burgundies in the Judgment of Paris tasting.

1882

The first documented arrival of Chardonnay in the U.S. occurs when Charles Wetmore plants budwood from Meursault, France, in California's Livermore Valley.

1252

Montrachet in Burgundy, arguably the source of the world's greatest Chardonnays, is first documented when Pierre and Arnolet de Puligny gave vines in "Mont Rachaz" to the Cistercian Abbey of Maizières.

**A TIMELINE OF
CHARDONNAY**

**"Back in 1982, my father had to talk to 30 different distributors before one would take on Kendall-Jackson Chardonnay. That's how prejudiced people were against Chardonnay at that time."
—CHRISTOPHER JACKSON,
STONESTREET ESTATE VINEYARDS**

1980

California has only 17,000 acres of Chardonnay vines planted, total.

a compound that, among other things, is frequently used to flavor movie theater popcorn. (Choices made during the wine-making process can control the amount of diacetyl produced by MLF, or whether it's produced at all.) And while more and more people claim they dislike buttery Chardonnays, the rather unobtrusively named Butter Chardonnay—which tastes as advertised—from JaM Cellars is the second-best-selling Chardonnay over \$12 in the U.S.

As the album cover once said, 50 million Elvis fans can't be wrong. But who are these Chardonnay fans, anyway, whether oak-and-butter-loving or emphatically not of that persuasion? According to a table of late-twentieth-century things from Dallas that I poured for, it's aunts. "My aunt is the Chardonnay lady for sure," one woman said.

Another seconded her: "My aunt is, too."

The boyfriend of the first woman added, "My aunt just drinks whiskey."

They did agree, however, that most of their friends—people their age—did not drink Chardonnay. "I think it's the next generation up who does," the first woman speculated. (I'll note, she had a glass of Chardonnay in her hand when she said this.)

Later that day, a guy from Newport Beach in his early 40s, up in Sonoma on a weekend tasting jaunt, guessed that in fact it was probably the next generation up from *him* that drank Chardonnay. His wife agreed. "My mother loves it," she added.

So 60-year-olds are the Chardonnay audience? At Far Niente, in the wine-club-members-only tasting area outside, I asked a woman from Chicago I'd guess was in her 60s (not that I was going to ask her) who she thought drank Chardonnay. She looked out at the vineyard rows, where the November leaves were the same golden hue as the wine she was drinking, and shrugged. "Just about everyone?"

The truth is that Chardonnay is the most popular white wine grape in the U.S., it has been for decades, and people of all ages love it. (Though I have informally noted that residents of Brooklyn under the age of 30 with large numbers of visible tattoos and/or piercings almost always refuse to drink Chardonnay. It's apparently a tribal statement.) And yes, some people love butter, and some love oak, and some love butter and oak, and some think they love butter and oak but really love creaminess and richness, and some people love steeliness and citrus zing, and some love stoniness, and some love spice, and some, like a woman from Chicago I poured for one breezy Thursday afternoon, love the 2018 Far Niente, which is what she told her husband. To which the husband, not looking up from the winery's order sheet, replied, "Right, the '19 Chardonnay."

"No, the '18 Chardonnay," she reiterated.

"Right. The last one he poured."

"No, that was the '18 Cabernet. I liked the '18 Chardonnay."

Still not looking up, "So we'll get one bottle each of the '18 and '19 Cabernet then."

I was sort of surprised she didn't club him with a bottle, but she left it at an eye roll.

"More Chardonnay?" I asked her.

"Definitely," she said.

1982

Kendall-Jackson launches Vintner's Reserve Chardonnay, which quickly becomes (and still is) the most popular white wine in the U.S.

1995

The New York Times reports on a nascent backlash against Chardonnay: the A.B.C. ("Anything But Chardonnay") movement. This does not stop millions of people from continuing to buy Chardonnay.

1999

Chardonnay is discovered by researchers at UC Davis to have originated centuries ago as a cross of Pinot Noir and the now-little-known Gouais Blanc grape variety.

2020

California has 90,684 acres of Chardonnay planted.



TOP CHARDONNAY REGIONS WORLDWIDE

BURGUNDY, FRANCE

What can one say? Burgundy, in east-central France, is the original home of Chardonnay and still produces the world's greatest examples (white Burgundy: Chardonnay). It also makes some of the world's most expensive wines, but good village Chablis and wines from the Mâconnais can still be had for \$25 to \$30. In those regions, some producers to hunt for include Jean-Marc Brocard, Bernard Defaix, Héritiers du Comte Lafon, Albert Bichot, Joseph Drouhin, Rijckaert, and Dominique Cornin.

SONOMA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

California's premier Chardonnay region has nearly 16,000 acres of the variety, making wines that range from rich and lush to brisk and taut (the latter particularly from the far Sonoma coast, right against the cold Pacific). There are any number of excellent producers, but a few top names to seek out include Hanzell, Benovia, Dutton-Goldfield, Flowers, Ramey, and Marine Layer.

WILLAMETTE VALLEY, OREGON

Oregon's premier wine-growing region has primarily been known for Pinot Noir and Pinot Gris, but in recent years, its potential for world-class Chardonnay has been more and more apparent. Seek out producers such as Bethel Heights, Eyrie, Ponzi, Walter Scott, Cristom, and Evening Land.

STA. RITA HILLS, CALIFORNIA

Arguably the top Chardonnay region on California's Central Coast, Sta. Rita Hills is unusual in that it is an east-west-facing valley. (Most California valleys run north-south.) That orientation funnels in cool wind off the Pacific, leading to beautifully focused, minerally wines. Seek out producers such as The Hilt, Sandhi, Liquid Farm, Brewer-Clifton, Melville, and Chanin.

MARGARET RIVER, AUSTRALIA

Even Australians agree that the Margaret River region is far, far away—the nearest major city, Perth, is a five-hour flight from Sydney. But the region's maritime climate and gravelly loam soils are ideal for Chardonnay (and Cabernet Sauvignon, for that matter). Producers to look for include Vasse Felix, Leeuwin Estate, Cullen, Woodlands, and Voyager Estate.

CHOOSE YOUR CHARDONNAY

25 bottles for every kind of Chardonnay drinker, whether you're after "fat! oak! fat! oak!" or seeking a steelier experience

"Chardonnay has had a big rethink, essentially. Acidity, fruit, less emphasis on viscosity, oak. There used to be so much emphasis on how much texture you could get—weight, weight, weight, weight, weight. Now, we basically have a scenario of two different styles of Chardonnay, new school and old school, almost like they are two different varieties altogether."

—STEVE MATTHIASSEN, VITICULTURAL CONSULTANT/WINEMAKER

LUSCIOUS AND OAK-INFLECTED

2020 Raeburn Russian River Valley Chardonnay (\$20)

Full-bodied and fruit-forward, all apricot, apple, butter, and toast—imagine an old-fashioned apple pie (without the sugar) and you won't be far off.

2019 Talbott Kali Hart Chardonnay (\$20)

This tongue-coating, creamy white hits the tropical fruit side of Chardonnay with its sweet mango and pineapple notes.

2019 Buehler Vineyards Russian River Valley Chardonnay (\$20)

Graham cracker and vanilla aromatic notes lead into the creamy lemon-curd flavors of this rich but balanced white.

2020 Rombauer Carneros Chardonnay (\$40)

There needs to be a story entitled "What We Talk About When We Talk About Rombauer" because there's rarely been a wine that invokes such divided responses. For every person who loves its lush peaches and crème brûlée character, there's another who'll violently reject it for the same reasons. But at the very least, it is unapologetically itself. (And, fun fact: Founder Koerner Rombauer's great-aunt Irma wrote the classic *Joy of Cooking*.)

2017 Patz & Hall Sonoma Coast Chardonnay (\$42)

Baking spices and wildflower honey merge in the aromas of this full-bodied but balanced Chardonnay. It's round and mouth-filling, partly thanks to 100% malolactic fermentation, but the bright, citrusy acidity keeps it fresh.

STONY, STEELY, AND CRISP

2020 Vins Auvigue Saint-Véran (\$25)

Brothers Jean-Pierre and Michel Auvigue, the fifth-generation winemakers at this family property, use only stainless steel tanks for this Mâcon white. The tart, crisp flavors suggest tangerine peel and Meyer lemons, with a chalky finish.

2020 Matthiasson Linda Vista Vineyard Chardonnay (\$34)

No new oak plus harvesting the grapes on the early side—the wine is only 12% alcohol—give winemaker Steve Matthiasson a pristine, stony white that is, among many other qualities, great with raw oysters.

2019 Frog's Leap Shale and Stone Chardonnay (\$35)

This aptly named Chardonnay, made from biodynamically farmed grapes, ferments in oak barrels but is then aged for a year in concrete vats; it's crisp and bright, with white peach notes and a mouthwatering, stony finish.

2019 Domaine Laroche Chablis Saint Martin (\$35)

Laroche owns vineyards throughout Chablis, which allows winemaker Grégory Viennois enormous latitude when choosing grapes for this taut, steely white. It's precise and focused, exactly as a village Chablis should be.

2019 Oceano Chardonnay (\$42)

A blast of passion fruit lifts from the glass when you pick up this vibrant Central Coast Chardonnay from the new San Luis Obispo AVA. It's crisp and energetic, with a lightly saline end.

BALANCING ACTS

2020 La Crema Sonoma Coast Chardonnay (\$23)

This widely available white walks a nuanced line between ripe fruit and zingy acidity; a small percentage of new French oak barrels (about 20%) adds spice but not overt "oakiness."

2018 Albert Bichot Secret de Famille Bourgogne Côte d'Or Chardonnay (\$28)

This middle-weight white Burgundy's toasty vanilla notes play against firm acidity and stone-fruit flavors. It's an excellent introduction to the Burgundian style of Chardonnay.

2018 St. Innocent Freedom Hill Vineyard Chardonnay (\$36)

Oregon winemaker Mark Vlossak is justifiably acclaimed for his impressive single-vineyard Pinot Noirs, and his touch with Chardonnay is no less fine. This flinty-creamy white with its layered citrus flavors is proof.

2017 Capensis Silene Chardonnay (\$40)

This South African Chardonnay offers beautiful nuance, with toasty notes from 10 months on lees (the spent yeasts from fermentation), lush lemon curd and pear flavors, and a creamy texture.

2019 Jordan Russian River Valley Chardonnay (\$36)

Winemaker Maggie Kruse carries on a tradition at Jordan of making impeccably balanced wines (red and white) that are rarely showy but instead nuanced and precise—and ageworthy, too. Her fine 2019 Chardonnay is no exception.

2019 Far Niente Chardonnay (\$70)

The combination of Napa Valley fruit, judicious use of new French oak barrels, and zero percent malolactic fermentation (no butteriness)—not to mention winemaker Nicole Marchesi's talent at her craft—gives this classic Chardonnay both richness and vivacity.

2019 Bergström Sigrid (\$90)

Josh Bergström is one of the Willamette Valley's top wine-making talents, and that's abundantly in evidence here. Lemon blossoms, savory lees notes, flintiness, ripe pears, quenching acidity—there are layers and layers of flavor in this gorgeous white.

GREAT CHARDONNAY VALUES

2020 Cono Sur Bicicleta Reserva Unoaked Chardonnay (\$10)

Not only is this lime-zesty, spicy Chardonnay a steal, but the winery itself has also devoted itself to sustainable production: Among other efforts, its workers ride bicycles in the vineyards (hence the Bicicleta name).

2021 Oxford Landing South Australia Chardonnay (\$10)

This Aussie white offers sweet stone-fruit flavors underpinned by a nice, crisp line of lemony acidity. True, it's not wildly complex, but it's definitely a total pleasure to drink.

2020 Hahn California Chardonnay (\$15)

The cool breezes of Monterey's Santa Lucia Highlands, where the majority of the grapes for this polished Chardonnay come from, give its lychee-pear flavors an appealing briskness.

2019 Z. Alexander Brown Uncaged Monterey Chardonnay (\$16)

A definite value buy for lovers of rich, oaky California Chardonnay—think pineapple upside-down cake, but with enough lively acidity to keep it from being cloying.

2020 Kendall-Jackson Avant Unoaked Chardonnay (\$17)

Kendall-Jackson's entry into the no-oak realm of Chardonnay is pale gold in hue and bright with sweet citrus and tropical fruit notes, an intriguing contrast to the winery's mega-popular Vintner's Reserve Chardonnay.

2019 Maison L'Envoyé Straight Shooter Willamette Valley Chardonnay (\$17)

Light in alcohol (at 12.7%) and without much oak influence, this clean, focused white hints at green apples with a touch of tangerine, a refreshing, northwest coast-style Chardonnay.

2020 Joseph Drouhin Mâcon-Villages (\$17)

White Burgundy can often be system-shockingly expensive, so finding this floral, elegant Mâcon at such a modest price—and from one of the great names of Burgundy—is an unmitigated pleasure.

2020 Wente Vineyards Morning Fog Chardonnay (\$18)

A perennial value buy from one of the earliest wineries to plant Chardonnay in California (back in the 19th century), this golden-hued wine is creamy, with melon and vanilla notes.