
CALIFORNIA'S FRESH WHITES

An array of distinctive white grapes is bringing new flavors to the Golden State, with plantings on the rise // **BY MARYANN WOROBIEC**

GRÜNER VELTLINER, Albariño and Verdelho were virtually unknown in California 20 years ago, but now they are part of a growing collection of white wine choices coming from the Golden State. While Chardonnay remains the most popular and most widely planted white grape, other white varieties—led by Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Gris—are gaining ground and bringing diversity to our wineglasses. Moreover, California whites have become the cool new thing to plant, grow and drink.

As a whole, this category of wines is sometimes referred to as “aromatic whites,” and for the purposes of this report, I use the term to encompass any California whites that are not Chardonnay-based. These exciting bottlings span a wide range of styles and flavors.

Some have their spiritual home in Europe, including Italian varieties such as Arneis, Cortese, Fiano and Vermentino, and Alsace whites like Riesling, Gewürztraminer, Pinot Gris, Pinot Blanc and Muscat. The Rhône Valley inspires plantings of Viognier, Roussanne, Marsanne, Grenache Blanc and Picpoul. Some are varietal plantings, some are field blends, along the European model, but there are plenty of winemakers not following any blueprint, blending grapes in new and sometimes unconventional ways.

Over the past year, we’ve tasted more than 500 of these up-and-coming whites in our Napa office. This report includes all the Sauvignon Blancs reviewed since our last report on the category (“Cool Whites, Hot Values,” Aug. 31, 2012), along with the Rhône whites tasted since our California Rhône coverage earlier this year (“California Rhône’s Savory Allure,” March 31, 2013). (A free



California vintners such as Napa Valley's Steve Matthiasson, who made an outstanding white blend in 2011, are experimenting with different winemaking techniques and grape combinations.

and plenty of acidity, especially the bottlings with limited or no exposure to oak. This gives them food-friendly character, making them popular among sommeliers and restaurateurs. Riesling is among the most food-friendly of wines, and tends to complement Asian-inspired dishes. Sauvignon Blancs can offer an acidity that is like a squirt of lemon juice to brighten vegetables and seafood. And Muscat and Chenin Blanc make terrific picnic wines.

One factor in the emergence of these wines in California is that grapes that were previously undistinguished elements in jug wines are now going into designated bottlings. Muscat plantings aren't new in California, but bottlings of the now popular, slightly sweet Moscato are popping up more and more. The best examples, like the St. Supéry Moscato Napa Valley 2011 (86, \$20), show how effusively fragrant and fruity Muscat can be, while others, like the Eno-tria Moscato Mendocino County 2012 (88, \$10), demonstrate the value this category offers.

Other varietals have what might be called retro appeal. "We've been making Chenin Blanc since 1972," says Dry Creek Vineyards president Kim Stare Wallace. Back then Chenin was popular, but Wallace remembers when it became a tough sell in the 1990s. "Everyone was gung-ho about Chardonnay," she recalls. Now, she says, American tastes and styles have swung back. The Dry Creek Chenin Blanc Clarksburg Dry 2012 (85, \$12) is a refreshing value, while the Chappellet Chenin Blanc Napa Valley 2011 (88, \$30) is a softer and more elegant take on the wine. The number of bottlings with Chenin Blanc on the label is growing, despite the fact that overall plantings of Chenin, once fodder for jug wines, have been scaled back significantly.

If you're looking to explore this category of whites, keep in mind that idiosyncratic grapes aren't always bottled solo. Many of the wines under review contain two or more grapes blended together. Some represent traditional medleys—such as blends of the Rhône varieties Viognier, Roussanne and Marsanne—or a partnering of Bordeaux transplants like Sauvignon Blanc and Sémillon. Other vintners are thinking outside the box, putting together grapes that hail from different parts of the Old World. Pine Ridge has been



Stainless-steel tanks—such as those at Napa's St. Supéry, which crafted one of this report's best Moscatos—are a common sight in the cellars of California producers looking to make distinctive, well-priced whites.

successfully blending Chenin Blanc and Viognier for years, with its 2011 another charming example (85, \$14); the Novy Four Mile Creek 2012 (88, \$14) is a blend of Viognier, Sauvignon Blanc and Gewürztraminer; and the Trenza Blanco 2010 (88, \$20) pairs Grenache Blanc and Albariño.

Without the pressure to follow a formula, winemakers have had a chance to find their own groove. "I don't try to make Friulano Bianco. I want to make a Napa Valley white wine," says Matthiasson, whose aforementioned 2011 white marries Sauvignon Blanc, Ribolla Gialla, Sémillon and Tocai Friulano. To him, Napa Valley white wine is an expression of ripe fruit and bright acidity.

Though some of the best California whites involve hands-on winemaking methods that make it difficult for them to compete in the values market, the category as a whole offers plenty of good buys thanks to factors such as naturally high yields (think Pinot Gris, Chenin Blanc and Sauvignon Blanc), lower fruit prices (especially compared with Chardonnay) and a preference for stainless-steel tanks (to preserve natural crispness) over expensive oak barrels. Some of the top values include the Joel Gott Sauvignon Blanc California 2012 (89, \$12), Bonterra Viognier Mendocino County 2010 (88, \$14), J Pinot Gris California 2011 (88, \$15) and a kitchen-sink blend called Ensemble White California 2011 (86, \$10).

Market interest in these aromatic white wines isn't showing any sign of slowing down, with producers reporting little trouble selling their wines, especially to restaurants in New York and San Francisco. With many new names offering refreshing flavors and good value, there are plenty of whites waiting to be discovered.

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CALIFORNIA'S WHITE WINE GRAPES

This chart tracks the total plantings, in acres, of selected white grape varieties in California over the past 20 years.

	1992	2002	2012
Chardonnay	59,971	98,743	95,074
Chenin Blanc	29,257	15,799	6,090
Gewürztraminer	1,712	1,547	1,752
Pinot Gris	NA	4,045	12,866
Riesling	4,079	1,846	4,452
Sauvignon Blanc	13,336	14,539	15,259
Viognier	138	2,001	3,001
Total White Grape Acreage*	176,310	190,594	180,238

*INCLUDES OTHER VARIETIES NOT LISTED HERE

SOURCE: UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available at www.winespectator.com/083113.)

A few years ago, there were hints of this category exploding. In the early 2000s, Pinot Gris (sometimes bottled as Pinot Grigio) became wildly popular. Around the same time, California Sauvignon Blanc producers began taking the grape more seriously, creating nuanced and expressive versions. Not far behind was an increase in plantings of other white varieties—from the Rhône, Italy, Spain and elsewhere. Two decades ago, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) tracked 21 white varieties; now it tracks 29. Even more telling is that while there used to be only 237 acres of “other” white grapes, now there are more than 4,000 acres of these once idiosyncratic plantings. Even though the total acreage of white grape varieties hasn’t changed much over the past 20

But wine lovers aren’t the only ones exploring. Winemakers are also experimenting by making these whites with different techniques. Some co-ferment grapes together, or ferment with native yeasts. Carbonic maceration, whole-cluster pressing, aging wines on their lees (and stirring the lees for softer textures) are among the techniques being used to make expressive whites. Concrete fermentors are also popular in these circles.

One of the winemakers tinkering with white wines is Adam Lee, who makes an assortment of wines under the Novy label. In 2012, Lee bottled two different Sauvignon Blancs from the same vineyard, one in which the grapes were skin-soaked, the other not. The skin-soaked grapes were mechanically harvested. “The fruit came in looking like it had gone through a crusher,” says Lee. He decided to let the fruit soak on the skin for 24 hours. Another portion of



Rows of Chenin Blanc in the vineyards of Dry Creek, in the Clarksburg region of the Central Valley, are one sign of the resurgence in California of aromatic white varieties.

years—according to the USDA, there were 176,310 acres of white wine grapes in California in 1992, and 180,238 acres in 2012—the spectrum of grapes being cultivated has shifted significantly.

And acreage tells just part of the story. The mix of bottlings that has come under review in *Wine Spectator*’s Napa office underscores the change. In 2002, 60 percent of the California white wines we blind-tasted were Chardonnays. Ten years later, that number had nearly flipped; in 2012, 56 percent of the white wines we reviewed were everything but Chardonnay. What was once a handful of curiosity bottlings has grown into a full-blown movement.

Some winemakers suggest that the younger generation of wine drinkers—known as the millennials—is constantly seeking new wines, and that anything outside of the classics stirs excitement. Many cite social media and a culture of instant sharing—“Hey look what I just discovered!”—that values the new and unusual over the familiar and recognizable.

fruit was handpicked from the same vineyard on the same day and not soaked. Otherwise, the wines were identically vinted and bottled. The Sauvignon Blanc Russian River Valley 2012 is a crisp, refreshing wine (89 points on the *Wine Spectator* 100-point scale, \$19), while the Skin-Soaked is smoother, with a pleasantly bitter citrus peel edge (88, \$24).

Winemaker Steve Matthiasson’s crisp, esoteric blend Matthiasson White Napa Valley 2011 (90, \$35) makes him a poster child for this movement; it’s a refreshing white, blending different grapes to achieve balance. Matthiasson suggests that the new wave of California white wines is in part a result of California winemakers wanting to make their mark. “There’s not much more to explore with how ripe you can get a wine,” he says, referring to the popular style in California wines.

Celebrated for their diversity, many of these whites share some common traits as well, with most showing fresh, aromatic profiles

MARYANN WOROBIEC'S RECOMMENDED CALIFORNIA WHITES

More than 500 wines were reviewed for this report. A free alphabetical list is available at www.winespectator.com/083113.
WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

TOP WINES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
LEWIS Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley Reserve 2010 Layered and detailed, with lemon meringue, guava, honeycomb, citrus zest and Key lime flavors that are rich, juicy and complex.	92	\$50
ARKENSTONE Sauvignon Blanc Howell Mountain 2010 Honeysuckle, apricot cobbler, lemon meringue and pineapple notes are intense, focused and very refreshing.	91	\$55
BONNY DOON Le Cigare Blanc En Bonbonne Beeswax Vineyard Reserve Arroyo Seco 2010 Baked apple and poached pear flavors have a very appealing spicy side, with plenty of elegance. Roussanne and Grenache Blanc.	91	\$50
BREGGO Pinot Gris Anderson Valley 2011 Shows great texture, both juicy and soft, with a core of pear, yellow apple, melon and nectarine. Complex and layered.	91	\$25
MERRY EDWARDS Sauvignon Blanc Russian River Valley 2011 Aromatic, with toasty, smoky notes and details of peach blossom and honeysuckle, balancing the ripe peach and nectarine notes.	91	\$32
PETER MICHAEL Sauvignon Blanc Knights Valley L' Après-Midi 2011 Vividly floral, with a vibrant acidity to punctuate the fresh ginger, lime zest, lemon, tangerine and fleshy mango flavors.	91	\$52
JOSEPH PHELPS Sauvignon Blanc St. Helena 2011 Succulent peach, nectarine and apricot flavors have an appealing fleshy texture and juiciness, with tropical and floral notes.	91	\$32
ALTAMURA Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley 2009 A rich, ripe and bold style, showing plenty of toasty oak, dried pineapple and ripe pear, with honey and floral accents.	90	\$48
ERIC KENT Sauvignon Blanc Sonoma County 2012 Juicy peach, citrus and melon flavors are ripe, smooth and succulent, with a refreshing acidity and floral honeysuckle details.	90	\$27
HALL Sauvignon Blanc Alexander Valley T Bar T Ranch 2011 Lush pineapple, lemon and mango flavors are framed by notes of spice, Key lime pie and toasted cedar.	90	\$30
JOHN ANTHONY Sauvignon Blanc Carneros Church Vineyard 2012 Succulent and juicy, with pineapple, lemongrass, peach and Key lime pie flavors that are crisp and clean and very refreshing.	90	\$45
LEWIS Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley 2011 Intense, with vivid honeysuckle, Meyer lemon, melon and peach flavors that are smooth and ripe, highlighted by smoky overtones.	90	\$37
MATTHIASSEN White Napa Valley 2011 Crisp and elegant, offering kaffir lime, lemon zest and ruby grapefruit flavors. Sauvignon Blanc, Ribolla Gialla, Sémillon and Friulano.	90	\$35
MCPRICE MYERS Viognier Santa Ynez Valley Larner Vineyard 2011 A very floral expression, with honeysuckle, jasmine and white pepper details to the peach, nectarine and apricot notes.	90	\$28
HERMAN STORY Tomboy Santa Barbara County 2010 Soft and elegant, offering a full body of yellow apple, peach and pear flavors, with toasted spices. Viognier and Roussanne.	90	\$42
TABLAS CREEK Côtes de Tablas Blanc Paso Robles 2011 An aromatic entry, with jasmine and toasted hazelnut notes, leads to apricot, melon, citrus and peach flavors. Viognier blend.	90	\$27

TOP VALUES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
EMMOLO Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley 2011 Vividly floral, showing honeysuckle and peach blossom notes up front, with elegant flavors of lemon, grapefruit and apricot.	89	\$16
JOEL GOTT Sauvignon Blanc California 2012 Offers honeydew melon, Key lime pie and peach flavors, with a vividly bright and very refreshing acidity.	89	\$12
ENOTRIA Moscato Mendocino County 2012 Intense, almost pungently floral and herbal, showing honeyed pear, apricot and peach notes, with a tangy, juicy finish.	88	\$10
FRANCISCAN Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley 2012 Fragrant, floral and juicy, offering an intense but balanced mix of honeysuckle, apple and lemon zest notes.	88	\$17
NAVARRO Gewürztraminer Anderson Valley Dry 2011 Crisp and lemony, with subtle touches of floral and tropical flavors that lend this version added aromas and nuances.	88	\$20
NOVY Four Mile Creek White North Coast 2012 A firm, juicy frame sets up a mix of peach, Meyer lemon, cantaloupe, dried pineapple and mango flavors. Viognier blend.	88	\$14
ZACA MESA Viognier Santa Ynez Valley 2010 An elegant white, offering lemon, grapefruit and green apple flavors that show details of apple blossom and celery leaf.	88	\$18
BENZIGER Sauvignon Blanc North Coast 2012 Key lime pie, tangerine, passion fruit and mango flavors are fresh and vibrant, with plenty of intensity on the finish.	87	\$16
FERRARI-CARANO Fumé Blanc Sonoma County 2012 Ripe pear, yellow apple and citrus zest notes are lively, refreshing and aromatic, with a nice thread of acidity.	87	\$15
FIRESTONE Gewürztraminer Santa Ynez Valley 2010 Crisp, floral and very spicy, showing rose petal, spice box and peach flavors, with a zingy lemon note.	87	\$14
ENSEMBLE California White 2011 Ripe apple, peach and tangerine notes are juicy and fragrant, with the acidity keeping the flavors fresh. Chenin Blanc blend.	86	\$10
J Pinot Gris California 2012 There's a whiff of smoke up front, but the fruit flavors are fresh and crisp within, including lemon, pear and green apple.	86	\$15
LEESE-FITCH Sauvignon Blanc California 2011 Toasty and spicy, this presents lemon, apple and melon notes, with firm acidity and good concentration.	86	\$12
BONTERRA Viognier Mendocino County 2011 Lean and refreshing, with juicy flavors of lemon-lime and peach, offering floral and grassy herbal tea details on the finish.	85	\$14
DRY CREEK Chenin Blanc Clarksburg Dry 2012 The brewed tea, dried chamomile, peach and poached pear flavors are soft and appealing, with a touch of refreshing acidity.	85	\$12
OAK GROVE Pinot Gris California Reserve 2011 Offers appealing tangy peach and citrus flavors, with touches of orange blossom and honeysuckle. Juicy on the finish.	85	\$8
THREE PEARS Pinot Gris California 2012 Smooth and spicy, showing ripe pear, melon and tangy citrus flavors, with a refreshing finish.	85	\$10