

Your Guide to California Chardonnay's Third Wave

Welcome to "Crib Sheet," your monthly shortcut to what's hot in wine right now, in four bottles, courtesy of Jon Bonné. This month: the new-new California chardonnay.

JANUARY 25, 2017 | story: **JON BONNÉ** | photo: **LIZZIE MUNRO**



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California chardonnay is arguably the most important of all American wines. Certainly it's the most available: The state grows more of it—90,000 acres worth, or equal to three San Franciscos—than any other grape, including cabernet.

Size doesn't necessarily matter, but quality does. And chardonnay from the Golden State has unquestionably entered a golden era—at least among its best wines. Today, a third wave of California chardonnay, one that has been emerging for the past decade, has succeeded in making its point: Chardonnay, in America, is great again.

Less than two decades ago it was difficult to find much evidence to that. For a long stretch, the style of chardonnay dominant in the Golden State could be considered silly juice: a bit sweet, low in acid, defined less by fruit (which was usually tawdry, all pineapple and overripe melon) than oaky and buttery flavors. That isn't to say people didn't like those flavors: They were as milquetoast as the multiplex snack bar. Brands like Kendall-Jackson built empires on such wines.

But for drinkers who sought cleaner, less worked-up flavors, chardonnay became an easy punch line, and by the turn of the millennium, the ABC movement—"anything but chardonnay"—was fully mobilized.

For those who came to wine early in the 2000s, chardonnay as pastiche may seem like the grape's principal American narrative. But that narrative actually represents a short period in America's history with this grape. Despite its current popularity, through most of the 20th century chardonnay in California was mostly a footnote; less than 200 acres were planted in the 1960s, mostly made in a style meant to pay homage to Burgundy, where it was the base material for legendary white wines. That was chardonnay's first wave.

A transformation began in earnest in the 1980s, when Americans suddenly wanted to order wine by varietal name. “I’ll have a glass of chardonnay,” became synonymous with “White wine, please,” for a new generation of drinkers. And if no one really knew what chardonnay tasted like, why not sex it up a bit with a bit of sugar and butter? Thus the second wave, or what Matt Licklider of Lioco, which makes top California examples today, refers to as the grape’s “fat Elvis phase.”

The flavors of that era weren’t coincidental. They were Comic Sans versions of qualities that great chardonnay makers sought: fermentation and aging in new oak barrels (or more typically, the use of oak chips to make cheap wine taste fancier); richness from stirring the lees in those barrels and minimizing the acid. In small doses, these efforts could transform a thin white Burgundy into something less anemic. But in sunny California? You got what John Kongsgaard, one of California’s great philosopher-vintners, once described as “the vulgarity of the technique.”

This frustrated the hell out of some of the grape’s true believers. By the mid-2000s, a cohort of winemakers began a counterreformation—a mix of veterans like Jim Clendenen of Au Bon Climat, who had never chased that tawdry style, and newcomers like Lioco and Sandhi, the latter founded by Rajat Parr and Sashi Moorman. They tilted against not just the “fat Elvis” era but also a mini-wave of wines that were aged in stainless steel tanks with no fat at all (and often inaccurately described as “Chablis-like”). That style, while an admirable protest against too-muchness, didn’t fully respect California sunshine.

Thus today’s third wave: wines made with ripe but not overripe fruit, often fermented in barrels but coaxed toward an innate richness and distinction, showing savory aspects without trying to copy Burgundy. I’ve been charting this third wave for nearly a decade, witnessing the unmistakable restoration of a grape’s good name.

Our latest PUNCH tasting was yet more proof. We focused primarily on the pioneers of this new style, whose wines have grown more refined and confident. If a decade ago the wines were more deliberately lean, today they're more deliberate in their fruit—a marked departure from that Calvinist era of all steel and no joy. You could serve many to your oak-and-butter-loving friends without worry.

If there's a knock, it's the cost. These wines have grown expensive, perhaps overly so in a few cases. That said, most of these winemakers still try to make less expensive bottles, including Lioco's Sonoma County blend, better than ever in the new vintage, or the Linda Vista bottle from Steve and Jill Matthiasson, not inexpensive at \$29 but not unreasonable given its Napa Valley origins.

These wines also matter because the new era of California wine is still, even today, sometimes portrayed as inhabiting the fringe. And so I've found it particularly important to acknowledge that the innovation in American cellars isn't on the margins; it's also with wines that can very well inhabit the mainstream.

THE CLASSIC | TIE

Matthiasson Linda Vista Vineyard Napa Valley Chardonnay

\$29

VINTAGE:
2015

PURCHASE

While Steve Matthiasson has demonstrated himself to be one of California's most talented winemakers for a while now, he came to chardonnay somewhat later than other wines, like his uniquely Italianate Napa white blend. Linda Vista is the vineyard directly behind his and his wife Jill's home, one that benefits from the cooling influences of southern Napa and once went into some of Beringer's best wines. They have taken over the farming and make their wine in the mold of the classic chardonnays Napa once produced: defined by a mix of freshness and full fruit, the barrel influence almost undetectable. The current 2015, from a drought year, is perhaps the best yet, full of fig and yellow plums with a pleasant savory note reminiscent of hay, one that often comes from this site.