

# *TOP 100 WINES IN THE WEST*

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**by Jon Bonné**

Something felt different this year. As I struggled to whittle down this year's Top 100 down to just 100 wines, I couldn't help but conclude that now is the best time in many years to be drinking American wine.

The Top 100 is, of course, about the Best of the West. Up and down the coast, there is better quality, and diversity, than ever.

Even as the largest wine companies keep expanding, some of the best work is being done on a small scale. This year's list includes both familiar names, like Hanzell and Larkmead, and nascent ones like Jolie-Laide and Lost & Found. In all cases, they're pioneering the best of West Coast wine.

The past few years have been tough for the wine industry -- a combination of the recession and a few nail-biting vintages. That's prompted a bit of soul searching, with people thinking hard about the wines they were making and about the industry's sometimes wonky economics. Out of this many winemakers found a renewed sense of purpose -- including, hopefully, a desire for honest wines that cater to our tastes not just for special occasions but also for Tuesday spaghetti nights.

This regrouping has also brought a great raft of innovation. It's no surprise that has been happening at new labels like Nick de Luca's Ground Effect, which took the popular combo of Chenin Blanc and Viognier and created an artisan version. But it's also happening at established labels; that's why Turley Wine Cellars bottled its own White Zinfandel -- not the wine you expect under that name, but one that makes an important point about Zinfandel's possibilities.

This year's list brings a great set of vintages to the fore. That includes Cabernet from 2009, a beautiful year for moderate ripening, as well as Pinot Noir and Zinfandel from 2010, a trickier year in California but ultimately one with some great successes. While 2010 was also a nail-biter in Oregon, it turned out wonderfully well, with a crop of Pinots that surpasses even the beautiful 2008s.

For white wines, the successive cool years of 2010 and 2011 brought no end of great bottles. That's one reason the Other Whites category is chock-full this year.

Speaking of Pinot, it seems to have finally calmed down after a whirlwind dance with fame. There's still plenty of iffy Pinot out there, and the grape's stylistic clash continues between those who want it to explore scenic back roads, and those who view it as a bullet train to Flavor Town.

But the best American Pinot Noir now fulfills the dreams of pioneers like Andre Tchelistcheff, David Lett and Josh Jensen, who saw the opportunity in the New World to rival the magnitude of Pinot's purpose in Burgundy. New labels like LaRue and established ones like Littorai and Londer continue the tradition.

Wine's geography is similarly growing ever more diverse. This year's Top 100 class hails from vineyards both young and ancient. The Sierra foothills continue their revival, while a remote spot like the Margarita vineyard, 30 miles south of Paso Robles, has again proved its value.

Remote coastal Sonoma and the original core of the Sta. Rita Hills remain Californian jewels, as do Oregon spots like Temperance Hill, perched at the edge of the coastal wind. Those coexist with sites like the Bedrock vineyard in Sonoma Valley, its ancient vines still alive and thriving. This year's boundaries have expanded even farther, to a frontier in Western wine just east of California.

And the fields hold a diversity of grapes unlike we've seen for decades. That includes renewed attention for grapes like Malvasia and Trousseau, which may seem new but have been on these shores for more than a century. Chardonnay isn't losing a popularity contest anytime soon, but long-held assumptions about what constitutes a quality variety face some long-overdue scrutiny.

Particularly in California, the full scope of wine history is now back in the conversation. The rift created by Prohibition hasn't quite healed, but our wine ways are stronger than ever. More than four decades ago, a generation of pioneers pursued their dreams, believing that American wine could create its own indigenous culture. As this year's Top 100 Wines shows, those dreams are being realized today in better ways than ever.

# *CHARDONNAY*

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After years of frustration at its excesses, now is a perfect time to love great California Chardonnay. Its most serious practitioners have taken advantage of a string of cooler vintages to show how much this most beloved of grapes in the state can be a vehicle to explore a sense of place. That focus, rather than falling prey to winemaker ambition and the tendency toward overkill, has created a glorious third wave of Chardonnay — one that gives in to neither the heavy hand of oak or the austerity of stainless steel. All these wines are meditations on what Chardonnay can be when planted in the right spot and interpreted by the right person. That brings its history in California full circle, in a wonderful way.

**2011 Matthiasson Linda Vista Vineyard Napa Valley Chardonnay** (\$25, 13.5%): Steve Matthiasson is better known for his white blend, but here he's farming a spot close to home -- right behind his house in Oak Knoll. An example of what cooler southern Napa can do so well with Chardonnay. Full of ripe pear, with almond, chervil, citrus zest and intense acidity to balance fleshy tree fruit.