

# The Press Democrat

**Outlet:** The Press Democrat

**Title:** Chardonnay wins North Coast Wine Challenge

**Date:** July 21, 2020

**Online Circulation:** 356,372 UVPM

**Print Circulation:** 116,918 Readership

**Link:** <https://www.pressdemocrat.com/article/lifestyle/chardonnay-wins-north-coast-wine-challenge/?artslide=0>

## Chardonnay wins North Coast Wine Challenge



**SLIDE 1 OF 7**

Sangiacomo 2018 Chardonnay Sonoma Coast snagged the Best of the Best award in the North Coast Wine Challenge 2020. (Christopher Chung/ The Press Democrat)

A classic chardonnay, grown with care by a longtime Sonoma County family in two cool-climate vineyards during an ideal growing season, took home the top prize in the 2020 North Coast Wine Competition last week.

It was a serendipitous collaboration between experienced vineyardists working in a perfect climate and a talented winemaker with a deep love of the varietal. Together, those forces pushed the 2018 white wine past a 2017 Russian River Valley pinot noir to become only the second chardonnay in the contest's history to take home the top prize of Best of the Best.

See the full list of more than 300 wines that won gold medals at the 2020 North Coast Wine Challenge [here](#).

The Sangiacomo 2018 Chardonnay Sonoma Coast impressed the judges as a perfect reflection of Sonoma County's fog-kissed coastal vineyards, offering complexity, the perfect amount of crisp acidity, a whisper of integrated oak and a long, lingering finish. It also won Best of Show White Wine and Best of Sonoma County.

"It's nice to be able to taste a sense of place," said judge Ziggy Eschliman, a Sonoma County radio and TV personality. "That's what the Best of the Best is all about."

Since it launched in 2013 under the sponsorship of The Press Democrat, the North Coast Wine Challenge has awarded its top accolade to one Bordeaux blend, three pinot noirs, two chardonnays, one rosé of pinot noir and last year, for the first time, an old vine zinfandel. The contest only accepts wines grown in the six North Coast counties of Lake, Mendocino, Marin, Napa and Sonoma and parts of Solano.

This year's contest was held July 13 through 15 at the Sonoma County Fairgrounds with a total of 24 judges from all over the state and safety protocols that required hand sanitizing, masks and a 30% reduction in staff and judges. The contest was originally scheduled for April 7 and 8 but was postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic.

"It did have its challenges with logistics and keeping everyone safe," said Chief Judge Daryl Groom. "But everyone ... did a fantastic job keeping the protocols and guidelines in place. I feel the judges did the best job in eight years focusing on the wines in front of them."

For Best of Show White wine, the Sangiacomo 2018 Chardonnay Sonoma Coast edged ahead of the Dry Creek Vineyard 2019 Sauvignon Blanc by just two votes, then beat out the best red wine — Papapietro Perry Winery's 2017 777 Clones Pinot Noir Russian River Valley — by two votes to snatch the top prize.

"It wasn't a slam-dunk, but I know the judges loved it," Groom said. "It was a stylish, rich, cool-climate chardonnay that just seemed to have everything in perfect balance."

Outside of Burgundy, Sonoma County may be one of the best places in the world to grow chardonnay. In 2015, chardonnay was the top white wine grape planted in the county, occupying more than 15,600 vineyard acres.

In the 2015 competition, Roche Winery of Sonoma, another family-run winery sourcing from the cool Carneros region, won for its Roche 2013 Carneros Chardonnay French Oak Reserve.

The venerable chardonnay varietal — pinot noir's sister grape from the Burgundy region of France — has fallen out of favor in recent years due to the tendency toward high oak extraction from barrels.

"There's still a lot of people who love the over-oaked, big, buttery chardonnays, but they are a thing of the past for most," said judge Liz Thach, wine educator and Master of Wine. "I love it when I can find a chardonnay that is as beautiful as that one."

This year's Best of the Best wine was made in a more classic style by consulting winemaker James MacPhail of Healdsburg, a self-described "noninterventionist" and a big fan of letting the vineyard speak.

"There is a group of us who are bringing chardonnays like this back, kind of authentic and real," MacPhail said. "They are not manipulated; there's not a lot of sugar or oak. ... We can make extremely sophisticated chardonnays here in Sonoma County."

MacPhail sold his own brand, MacPhail Wines, to Hess Collection in 2011 but kept his small Healdsburg winery, where he has launched a new brand, Tongue Dancer Wines. He also makes wine for various clients there, including Sangiacomo Family Wines.

“My winemaking style really lends itself to the Sangiacomos, because I really enjoy the cooler climate chardonnays and pinots,” he said. “I love wines with weight and texture, and so I work in the cellar for that. ... I like to stir the dead yeast cells up into the wine, which helps with the mouthfeel and texture.”

The Sangiacomo family of Sonoma is well known on the North Coast for growing and supplying high-quality chardonnay and pinot noir to more than 60 wineries.

They own 14 vineyards — a total of 1,600 acres, with the majority planted to chardonnay — from the Carneros, Petaluma Gap and Sonoma Coast AVAs. They started making their own wine relatively recently. Their first vintage was 2016, and they launched their own label in 2018. This is their first time entering the North Coast Wine Challenge.

“We have a lot of experience, and it will teach you a lot in grape growing,” said Steve Sangiacomo, who co-owns the business with his siblings, Mike Sangiacomo and Mia Pucci. “Chardonnay is part of our grape-growing DNA. It’s the first variety that we planted, and we’ve been planting it for 50 years.”

The siblings’ grandparents emigrated from Genoa, Italy, to the Bay Area and purchased a 52-acre fruit tree ranch in the southern reaches of the Sonoma Valley in 1927. After struggling through the Depression, the family became the largest pear-growing farmers in Sonoma County. But when the pear market crashed in the late 1960s, they switched to growing grapes and by the late 1980s, they had converted all their orchards to vineyards.

Their view of how chardonnay should be made aligns closely with MacPhail’s vision.

“I think the trend is now toward complexity and minerality and nice acidity to balance the richness and fruit,” Steve Sangiacomo said. “That way you have a little of everything. ... The wines represent our vineyards, and our vineyards are expressed through our wines.”

After farming for nearly a century, the Sangiacomo family is proud to be third-generation farmers and to receive recognition for their hard work over the decades.

“We’re extremely honored and proud of what it (Best of the Best award) represents for the North Coast,” he added. “We’ve been here for so long.”

Judge Mick Schroeter, director of winemaking for Sonoma-Cutrer Vineyards in Windsor, has bought chardonnay from the Sangiacomos for many years. Sonoma-Cutrer is known for its single-minded devotion to the varietal.

“I really loved the balance of this chardonnay, the fruit and the oak,” Schroeter said. “It had a nice complexity, and the palate

## **Best of Show awards by category**

There were 1,064 entries in this year’s contest, up from 1,059 in 2019 and 941 in 2018. The biggest classes entered included pinot noir, cabernet, zinfandel, chardonnay and sauvignon blanc.

There were 334 gold medals given or 31.1% of the total, breaking last year’s record of 28%.

Judges awarded 530 silver and 148 bronze awards, giving medals to 95% of the wines entered.

Over the span of two days, the 24 judges whittled the wine entries down to the top 29 for the sweepstakes round, with multiple judge-offs to select the best of each varietal. There were two sparkling, six whites, two rosés, 16 reds and three dessert wines that made it to the third and final day’s taste-off.

Red wines, as usual, were the biggest category, representing 66% of the entries. There were quite a few lesser-known varietals in the sweepstakes round however, including viognier, riesling, sangiovese, barbera and tempranillo.

“We only allow one wine of each varietal or wine type into the sweepstakes,” Groom said. “It seems that the most prominent and known varietals get more votes. ... It wasn’t really surprising when voting got down to two wines for Best of the Best, a pinot and a chard.”

As the top-scoring white wine, the Sangiacomo 2018 Chardonnay Sonoma Coast, which had hints of citrus and pear flavors, earned 99 points.

The Best of Show Red went to the Papapietro Perry 2017 777 Clones Pinot Noir Russian River Valley, which also earned 99 points. The judges praised it for its delicate balance of oak and fruit.

The Healdsburg winery got four gold medals last year for its pinot noirs plus a one gold for a rosé of pinot noir. Founders Ben Papapietro and Bruce Perry met in San Francisco and started making wine in Ben’s garage, then moved up to Sonoma County in the 1990s to get serious about pinot. The friends have been winning awards ever since.

Best of Show Rosé went to the Rodney Strong 2019 Rosé of Pinot Noir Russian River Valley. It earned 98 points. The judges described it as “bright, lively and seamless” with silky rose and grapefruit zest flavors.

The flavors in this “intentional” rosé were boosted by prolonged hang time, with cooler weather in the summer of 2019 allowing the grapes to achieve maturity in ideal conditions.

“The rosés were really strong this year,” Groom said. “The Rodney Strong got a gold medal last year.”

Best of Show Sparkling went to the Domaine Chandon NV Methode Traditionnelle Reserve Sparkling Rosé of Pinot Noir, Sonoma/Napa Counties.

The sparkler garnered 98 points, and the judges praised its complexity, mouthfeel and flavors of fresh fruit and stone fruit.

Best of Show Dessert Wine went to the Navarro Vineyards 2019 Gewurztraminer Cluster Select Late Harvest, Anderson Valley. The wine also won Best of Mendocino County.

The sweet wine was awarded 99 points, and the judges enjoyed its “luscious” flavor of candied pineapple, with ginger spice on the finish.

Last year, Navarro Vineyards in Philo also won Best of Show Dessert Wine for their 2018 Riesling Cluster Select Late Harvest, Anderson Valley.

“Navarro is no stranger to world-class dessert wines,” Groom said.

## **Best of County Awards**

In the county competition, Best of Lake County went to the Boatique 2019 Rosé of Malbec, which got 94 points.

Tasting notes from the judges praised its bright berry and violet flavors and nice spice.

Boatique Winery is located in the picturesque Red Hills Appellation in Kelseyville at 2,266 feet above sea level. With its volcanic soil and high-elevation farming, the region is known for producing intensely flavored wines.

Best of Napa County went to the Okapi 2016 Cabernet Sauvignon, which earned 99 points.

The judges liked its silky texture and described it as powerful and well balanced. The cabernet is grown in the Oak Knoll Vineyard District of Napa, between the cool Carneros region and the up-valley heat, where the growing season is able to extend the hang time.

Best of Sonoma County went, of course, to the Sangiacomo 2018 Chardonnay, Sonoma Coast, which was sourced from two vineyards.

About two-thirds of the grapes came from the family's chillier Roberts Road vineyard, in both the Petaluma Gap and Sonoma Coast AVAs, and the other third was grown in the Green Acres Vineyard in Carneros. Both vineyards are certified sustainable.

"I know Roberts Road like the back of my hand," MacPhail said. "And I had always enjoyed the wines from Green Acres from other producers. ... I knew the style it was expressing."

The growing climate in 2018 was mild, with even temperatures throughout the season and none of the heat spikes of 2017.

"It let the vines mature and created that kind of ideal hang time and phenolic maturity," Steve Sangiacomo said. "Green Acre gives that kind of richness in the fruit profile, and the Roberts Road adds that minerality and structure and acidity."

In addition, the grapes from both vineyards came from four different clones, which added to the wine's complexity.

"They each add their own component," he added. "It's like chefs using multiple ingredients. They all play a role."

MacPhail makes a total of four chardonnays for Sangiacomo Family Wines, including a couple from single vineyards.

MacPhail grew up in Marin County, and his parents were very Euro-centric, placing a bottle of wine on the table with dinner every day. Although his dad's family had worked in appliances for generations, on his mom's side were third-generation dairy farmers from west Petaluma.

"I had the farming gene, and I loved the hard work and being outdoors," MacPhail said. "I loved the history of wine and the agricultural product."

In his "third tour of college," he studied wine at UC Davis at night and on his days off from working at Quivira in Healdsburg, where then-winemaker Grady Wann provided mentorship.

“He took me under his wing,” MacPhail said. “I was understanding that wine is made in the vineyard. ... I decided to learn the old-fashioned way, keep my boots in the dirt and work with great producers.”

After working in the industry for seven years, he started his own label in 2001, focusing solely on pinot noir. By 2008, he decided to try his hand at chardonnay to balance out his Burgundy portfolio.

“Growing up with wine around the table, I gravitated toward white Burgundies,” he said. “I’m not trying to beat the French at their own game, but there is a stylistic component that I like to emulate: the weight and the texture and letting the fruit shine.”

As for food pairings for the award-winning chardonnay, the winemaker suggested a shrimp scampi with fettuccine or seared scallops with lemon risotto.

MacPhail believes that, as at the Paris Tasting of 1976, the chardonnays being made in Sonoma County today could compete with the best of the best anywhere.

“I would argue that we are at a time now in Sonoma where I could gather a couple of other producers, throw some chardonnays in with some of the biggest white Burgundies and go head to head,” he said. “The respect level keeps going up because there are producers now that are making very sophisticated and interesting and beautiful chardonnays.”

Since cool-climate chardonnays start with high acidity, they are age-worthy right out of the gate. MacPhail estimated that the Sangiacomo 2018 Chardonnay easily will stay at its peak for 10 to 14 years or more.

Since the Sangiacomo family is still pulling delicious wines out of their cellar made with their fruit in the '70s and '80s, he wants that trend to continue with their own wines.

“I want that to happen to them,” he said. “Now that they’ve started their own legacy, I want to make sure they can pull these wines out of the cellar for 20 years.”

Sangiaco has a website where you can order the winning chardonnay and a new tasting room in Sonoma with an outside terrace that is open by appointment.

Local wine shops such as Bottle Barn and BevMo! will also carry many of the competition's award-medal winning wines.

Due to safety concerns, the North Coast Wine & Food Festival, where consumers normally can taste all the award-winning wines, was canceled for 2020. It will return in summer 2021.

## Trends in the wine industry

For the 2020 North Coast Wine Challenge, Groom put together panels with a diversity of judges — one winemaker, one retailer and one wine educator — who could judge the wine from different perspectives.

Each panel and judge tasted through about 122 wines, a bit more than usual because there was a flurry of late entries, he said.

Entries in the various varietal classes mirrored last year's competition, with the biggest class, pinot noir, increasing by 5%, and chardonnay down by 10% (after jumping 10% last year). Rosé leveled off after growing by 8% in 2018 and 16% in 2019.

Groom said the highest percentage of gold medals were given to sparkling (44%), zinfandel (39%), petite sirah (38%) and cabernet sauvignon (35%).

In the middle range was pinot (31%), merlot (33%), syrah (28%) and sauvignon blanc (32%). On the lower end was the rosé (19%), chardonnay (24%) and Red Bordeaux (22%).

Judge Bill Hayes, longtime wine buyer and manager for BevMo!, said the biggest consumer trend right now is high-acidity wines that are food-friendly and lend themselves to pairings.

“Sauvignon blanc is really taking off, along with rosés,” he said. “People are getting into spicy and savory food, and the sauvignon blanc is easy to sell because of the price point, value and food-friendly aspects.”

Chelsea Barrett, a first-time judge and rising young winemaker for Materra Wines in Napa, said she is seeing a lot of growth in the middle tier, the \$20-to-\$40 wines that are a good value and accessible.

“I feel like there’s a lot more demand for things that are new and cool,” she said, referring to her own generation’s adventurous tastes. “But I think there’s always going to be a demand for the classics like sauvignon blanc and chardonnay.”

Schroeter, who has served as a judge for all eight competitions, said Sonoma County is well-placed for the current consumer demands.

“Consumers are looking for high-quality wines at a good value,” he said, “A lot of Sonoma County wines sit in the \$15-to-\$40 price point, and that’s where there’s been tremendous growth.”

As for this year’s harvest, Schroeter said the crop is looking to be average to below average, which is good news for quality.

“We still have another six weeks, but so far the weather has been ideal,” he said. “There’s fog in the morning, and it’s not too hot in the afternoon, so it looks to be another classic vintage in Sonoma County.”

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