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CHARDONNAY VINEYARDS

THE STORIES BEHIND DURELL • EL DIABLO • HEINTZ • HUDSON
HYDE • RITCHIE • SANGIACOMO • AND OTHER LEGENDARY SITES

BIEN NACIDO VINEYARD

CALIFORNIA'S BEST CHARDONNAY VINEYARDS

DEVOTED GRAPEGROWERS ARE THE ESSENTIAL SOURCE FOR THE STATE'S MOST EXPRESSIVE BOTTLES. WE PROFILE 11 SITES THAT SET THE QUALITY BENCHMARK

BY MARYANN WOROBIEC



Chris and Larry Hyde of Hyde Vineyards in Carneros supply grapes to Kistler, Aubert and other leading wineries in addition to their own brands.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
ALANNA HALE

The saying “great wine starts in the vineyard” holds plenty of truth, particularly when it comes to Chardonnay. The grape can be wonderfully transparent, with the imprint of the vineyard often as significant as the fingerprint of the winemaker’s choices.

What makes a great Chardonnay vineyard? Winemaker James Hall of Patz & Hall sums it up succinctly: “Well, all of the objective details: soil type, aspect, rootstock, clone and farming. Then there’s the intangibles that are more elusive—it has to be *terroir*-driven. I want my wines to make people search for adjectives.”

For this story, I focus on vineyards that sell grapes to multiple clients (versus estate vineyards, of which there are also plenty to celebrate). I took into account track records of scores from our blind tastings, and interviewed dozens of California Chardonnay winemakers and growers. Of course, there are many vineyards in the state that deliver quality. But the 11 profiled here are the vineyards every Chardonnay fan needs to know. Their names are often the smallest text on the wine label—Hyde, Hudson, Bien Nacido, Ritchie and so forth. But they have an outsized impact on the wine in the bottle.

All are family-run properties, most of them backed by generations of experience. Consider these vineyards stamps of approval for an excellent bottle of Chardonnay. If you’re looking at a wine list and don’t recognize the producers’ names, you can feel confident that wines with these vineyard designations are likely terrific.

To be sure, quality can come at a price. The grapes from these sites often command a premium, and the resulting price tags on the bottles will reflect that. But those extra costs allow for more precision viticulture, which raises the tide of Chardonnay quality in the Golden State.

“The Burgundians as such have done a good job—and deservedly so—featuring their vineyards,” says California vintner Alan Ramey. “I don’t think we have as much history, particularly because the focus was so much on wineries.” He wonders if we’re ready to increase the emphasis on vineyard *terroir* within our domestic Chardonnay narrative.

Also looking at Burgundy—where

the vineyard name can be more prominent on labels than the vintner—is Kistler winemaker Jason Kesner. “It’s an interesting thing for us to think about in this business,” he says. “In particular, as we map out our future, I wonder when do we start making the vineyard [designate] bigger? And when does [the winery name] get smaller? Do we move [the winery name] down to the bottom? Isn’t that the ultimate goal?”

AT THE END OF THE DAY, the relationship between grower and winemaker is essential for quality wines. “The best vineyard managers are typically easier to work with

because they have to be open-minded and flexible to an extent,” explains vintner Claire Ramey. “Because if you are not, then you are not keeping up to date.” She adds that good growers have to love their vineyards and have to pay attention. “If you don’t love it, you’re not going to make quality decisions ... [growers] can’t be greedy. They have to be measured and patient.”

“In every instance [of the vineyards I work with], it feels like it’s about the relationships as much as it is the land; that of the farmer to the land, but too, that of the grower to the winery,” Kistler’s Kesner adds. “Or maybe put a different way, because of those relationships, it feels like we get more from the land ... our relationships run deep with each.”

Most of the growers profiled in this story pride themselves on growing grapes specific to their winemaking clients’ desires. Various soils, clones, trellising, exposures, let alone individual picking decisions, mean that these vineyards aren’t making cookie-cutter wines.

After visiting Chardonnay vineyards up and down California, spending hours in the vines and talking to farmers, I suggest another relationship to nurture here—that between wine lovers and these special sites.



Sangiacomo

Vittorio Sangiacomo emigrated from Genova, Italy, in 1913 and was working in the garbage business in San Francisco when he discovered Sonoma—he would come up on the weekends to get away from the foggy weather. He longed for the family farm back in Italy. So in 1927, he bought a 55-acre parcel in Sonoma, known now as the Home Ranch.

At first, he planted apples and cherries and pear trees, becoming one of the largest pear growers in Northern California, packing and sending the fruit to canneries. The Sangiacomo grandchildren—Mike, Steve and Mia—recall eating plenty of canned pears growing up. “Canned pears and Cheddar cheese was a favorite snack,” says Mia.

Vittorio’s four children—Angelo, Bob, Buck and Lorraine—wanted to diversify to other agricultural crops, especially as the pear business was declining. They first planted grapes in the Green Acres site in 1969. Angelo and his siblings would encourage winemakers to try making wine from a small quantity of their grapes before committing to purchasing larger quantities.

“They learned that pears were unfortunately a commodity crop, as much as they tried to distinguish themselves,” explains Steve. “So it was important when they made the transition to grapes to really create this sense of exclusivity of these vineyards and the specialness of each site.” He adds that Napa already had a reputation for fine wine. “Sonoma was right behind them as this world-renowned area to grow wine grapes. The light bulb went on, that we could really distinguish ourselves among peers.”

Nearly 100 years later, the third generation of Sangiacomos farm 14 vineyards all over Sonoma County, encompassing more than 1,600 acres of grapes, making them one of the largest family-owned winegrowing businesses in Sonoma. Some of the most well-known sites include the Home Ranch, Green Acres Vineyard and Roberts Road Vineyard. Gundlach Bundschu was the first winery to use the Sangiacomo designation, in 1979.

They launched their own wine brand, Sangiacomo Family Wines, with the 2016 vintage. “You know, timing is everything,” points out Steve. “We’re excited to have consumers really see our interpretation of wine through our eyes.” James MacPhail is the winemaker.



Three generations of the Sangiacomo family, circa 1985: (from left) Founders Vittorio and Maria; their children Bob, Buck, Lorraine and Angelo; Angelo's children Mike, Steve and Mia



Vineyards at Sangiacomo



Siblings Mike, Mia and Steve

ABOUT SANGIACOMO

County: Sonoma
 Appellation: Carneros;
 Sonoma Coast; Petaluma
 Gap; Sonoma Valley
 Year first planted: 1969
 Total acres planted: 1,659
 Chardonnay acres: 1,095
 Primary Chardonnay clones planted: Old Wente; 17; Dijon 95; UCD 4
 Primary soil types: Zamora; Haire series; Hulichicha series
 Certified sustainable by Certified California Sustainable Winegrowing and Fish Friendly Farming

They use only about 2% of the grapes for themselves; the rest are sold to more than 80 different wineries, half of which use Sangiacomo (or one of their vineyards) as a designation. The family trademarked the Sangiacomo name in 1989 to protect its use on wine labels.

“When I started working with Chardonnay, it was even more transparent that you’ve got to let the site speak,” says MacPhail. “I know that’s a common phrase among winemakers, but I don’t think there’s really another variety that is as transparent—it just shows the site. And with the Sangiacomo array of vineyards and sites, I was like a kid in a candy store.”

One of the features of having grown grapes for so long is the variety of material to work with. “Wine is about layers,” explains Steve. “Having different ages of vines is really important. We have 50-year-old vines, 40-year-old vines, as well as 30 and 20. So while it’s definitely important to invest in the vineyards and redevelop them, it’s equally important to reinvigorate some of the older vineyards to create that complexity.”

Like many multigenerational farming families, their take on sustainability is intuitive. “Sonoma County, as you know, is one of the most sustainable wine regions in the world: 99% of our vineyards are certified sustainable. But the formula has

been the same back to our grandfather. Take care of the land. You take care of the people that farm the land, and you take care of how you farm, and all the practices we do, and the commitments,” says Steve. “That’s the form [of sustainability] that we’ve taken for 95 years. That’s what we’ve done in this generation, and hopefully the next generation will follow.”

RECENT CHARDONNAYS FROM SANGIACOMO VINEYARDS

SCORE	WINE	PRICE
93	SANGIACOMO Petaluma Gap Roberts Road Vineyard 2020	\$68
93	SANGIACOMO Sonoma Coast 2021	\$58
93	SANGIACOMO Sonoma Coast Four Siblings 2021	\$70
93	WALT Sonoma Coast Sangiacomo Vineyard 2021	\$55
92	MACROSTIE Carneros Sangiacomo Vineyard 2021	\$48
92	SAINTSBURY Carneros Sangiacomo Green Acres Heritage Block Old Wente 2020	\$72
92	SANGIACOMO Carneros Catarina Vineyard 2020	\$68
92	SANGIACOMO Carneros Home Ranch 2020	\$68
92	SANGIACOMO Sonoma Coast Green Acres Vineyard 2020	\$68
92	SOJOURN Sonoma Coast Sangiacomo Vineyard 2021	\$45



OPPOSITE BOTTOM RIGHT: BERENIS SPARK

CHARDONNAY'S Fresh Start

CALIFORNIA VINTNERS FOCUS
ON LIVELIER VERSIONS
FROM COOLER CLIMATES

BY MARYANN WOROBIEC



PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMES RANSOM

After the hours-long drive through the redwood forests and winding back roads of Sonoma County, where there's typically no cell service or signs of civilization, it's a great relief to see Wayfarer Vineyard. The sight of those vine-covered slopes and ridges means you're not lost.

Wayfarer is located in the newest established West Sonoma Coast AVA, the county's recent appellation and its 19th overall. This is at the edge of where grapes can grow in Sonoma, where

steep, mountainous terrain rises to elevations of 400 to 1,800 feet. The bitter wind from the Pacific Ocean easily finds its way to the area's vineyards.

"This region is so cool," says Wayfarer proprietor Cleo Pahlmeyer. "It's the combination of the elevation and the proximity to the coast. You can really taste it in the wines. You have the structure and the texture from having the breezes and the strong sun. You know the feeling of just standing in the sun, and then moving into



Wayfarer Vineyard proprietor Cleo Pahlmeyer is a Chardonnay pioneer in the newly designated West Sonoma Coast AVA, a cool-climate region close to the Pacific Ocean that represents the frontier for grapegrowing in Sonoma.

the shade? I always think of that as being the ideal environment for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay."

Not all Chardonnay vineyards are this remote. In fact, one of the variety's best features is how well it grows in an array of regions up and down California. Yet Wayfarer represents not only a geographic frontier, but also a stylistic one. Along with other leading producers, Wayfarer is keying into a newer, modern interpretation of California Chardonnay, yielding quieter versions that are more elegant and restrained. The fruit flavors in these wines are vibrant, fresh and juicy, but not overripe, while the oak influence is more judicious. Although there are still plenty of oaky, buttery examples to be found on the shelves of supermarkets, the current crop of top-rated Chardonnays embody this new movement toward freshness and transparency.

The cool vineyards of Wayfarer offer an ideal location to produce this style of Chardonnay, which does particularly well in this coastal, chilly region. Here, the sun is able to ripen the grapes, but the cool temperatures preserve their natural acidity. Whether in the Sonoma Coast or in the equally remote stretches of other cool-climate areas such as Sta. Rita Hills in Santa Barbara County or

plenty of them are single-vineyard expressions made from purchased grapes, others are estate-grown versions or regional blends. (For more on the best vineyards for Chardonnay in the Golden State, see my feature story on page 28.)

The list of the top-scoring examples this year reads like a who's who of California Chardonnay: Aubert, Ferren, HdV, Paul Hobbs, Hudson Vineyards, Kistler, Peter Michael and Ramey are all there. Arista, Brewer-Clifton, Ridge and Sandhi are also names Chardonnay lovers should know. While styles vary, expect even the richest



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES RANSOM (TOP); PHOTOGRAPHS BY DONALD RAY, APRIL; PHOTOGRAPHS BY GETTY IMAGES (BOTTOM)



The Chardonnay harvest in the Knights Valley vineyards of Peter Michael yields highly rated versions that offer both rich flavors and vibrant acidity.

versions to still show restraint, with fresh acidity and notes of minerality. There doesn't seem to be a clear leader behind this stylistic shift, but rather a chorus of talented winemakers who are all moving in the same direction.

"They're not manipulated," says James MacPhail about the Chardonnays he makes for The Calling and Sangiacomo. "I'm not a sugar fan. I'm not a heavy oak fan. I really want to respect what each site is showcasing. I'm a big white Burgundy fan. They're my favorite. But I'm not trying to make Burgundy. We are in California, we need to respect California. But stylistically I feel a lot of Chardonnay winemakers now are going back to the traditional, Old World style of Chardonnay. Not doctored with sugar or oak or buttery notes. It's pure. It's about the simplicity and the pureness of the fruit—and honest, honest winemaking."

"Chardonnay can show so many different facets," says Williams Selyem winemaker Jeff Mangahas as he charts his own progression with Chardonnay in recent years. "I've been backing off a little bit on the picking decisions. I've been focusing a little bit more on acid preservation."

Some vintners think the new style of Chardonnay marks a natural evolution. Having overcome the learning curve of where the grapes grow best and how to work with them, they've become more focused on letting the site show through. Most winemakers prefer a nighttime pick, when the grapes are cold, which helps protect their skins and pulp as well as their flavors. Gentle, slow



Winemaker James MacPhail is relying on a minimalist approach in the cellars at Sangiacomo, as well as in his work at The Calling, in order to achieve a purer, more transparent style of Chardonnay.

and cold whole-cluster presses are in fashion, as is barrel-aging in older French oak. Beyond that, opinions diverge about lees contact, malolactic conversion, fining and filtering, but you can't escape the fact that across the board these new wines are fresher when young than they used to be.

There's also a consensus that wine drinkers are more interested in where their wines come from. "We are just on the precipice of really starting to mature—as an industry, as a consumer base—to understanding the beauty of individual sites," says Kistler's Jason Kesner. "It goes along with the general maturation of our society toward recognizing that you can get way better stuff at the farmers market than you can at the supermarket. And I think the wine consumer is there."

Senior editor MaryAnn Worobiec is Wine Spectator's lead taster on California Chardonnay.

"I feel a lot of winemakers now are going back to the traditional, Old World style of Chardonnay."

JAMES MACPHAIL



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Rating California Chardonnay Vintages in Major Regions

	Carneros	Napa	Santa Barbara*	Sonoma	
2021	94	92	94	95	Another drought year with low yields; the best wines are fresh and intense
2020	93	92	93	94	A dry year yielded concentrated, balanced wines; most Chardonnay picked before the wildfires
2019	95	92	91	96	Warmer weather than in 2018 produced wines with a deep well of fruit and spice flavors
2018	92	90	93	95	Nearly ideal conditions delivered wines with concentrated fruit flavors and crunchy acidity
2017	94	90	91	93	Ample winter rain followed by a warm growing season yielded complex and powerful wines
2016	90	89	89	90	Solid but variable year; fine quality in Sonoma and Santa Barbara
2015	90	89	90	90	Sonoma strong again in another drought year; elegant and refined in style

*Santa Barbara County, Sta. Rita Hills, Santa Maria Valley and Santa Ynez Valley AVAs
 Note: Most California Chardonnays are ready to drink upon release.
 Vintage ratings: 95-100, classic; 90-94, outstanding; 85-89, very good; 80-84, good; 75-79, mediocre; 50-74, not recommended

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRENNAN SPARK