

Wine Spectator

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Best^{of}_{the} Best

*Top-rated wines from the
world's benchmark regions*



Annual Tasting Reports on
Washington and the Rhône Valley

PLUS Exclusive: Beaucastel Unveils
Groundbreaking New Winery

Best of the Best

Our editors profile the world's greatest wine regions and guide you to the wines and wineries that are leading the way

Of the myriad growing regions and wine varieties beloved by our readers and covered in-depth by our editors each year, a select few stand out for track records of excellence over many years, benchmark wines that express *terroir*, and forward thinking in the vineyards and cellars that sets global standards for sustainability for future generations, among other achievements.

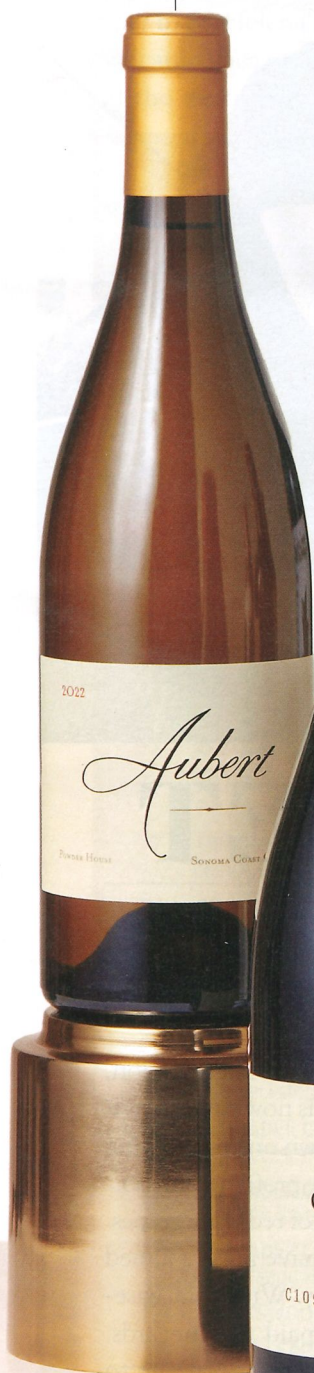
For this cover package, we have selected eight of these superlative wine categories, some Old World, some New, to profile, and in addition to providing overviews of their histories and modern progress, assembled lists of their top-performing bottlings from our editors' most recent blind tastings. In all, nearly 400 wines, representing California Cabernet, California Chardonnay, California Pinot Noir, Bordeaux, Burgundy, the Rhône Valley, Piedmont and Tuscany, are highlighted. We know you'll find some personal favorites already among them, but hope you'll also discover some places, wineries and wines new to your palate from our "Best of the Best."

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PHOTOGRAPH BY
JEFF HARRIS

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CALIFORNIA CHARDONNAY

A golden age for the state's premier white is defined by expressive, cellarworthy wines

BY MARYANN WOROBIEC

Chardonnay has been an important part of the California wine scene especially since the 1970s, when plantings of the grape took off. According to the most recent California Grape Acreage Report (2023) put out by the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, there are more than 88,000 acres planted in the Golden State, or 19% of the total wine grape acreage, second only to Cabernet Sauvignon.

Today California Chardonnay represents one of the most consistent sources for high quality, expressive, *terroir*-driven and ageable wines. But the various fashions of Chardonnay and the path this category has been on can create confusion among consumers. The Chardonnay styles of the 1990s and the cheap Chardonnays on supermarket shelves are no longer representative of the best the state has to offer. One of the most common refrains I hear from vintners is that wine lovers tell them, "I don't like Chardonnay, but I like yours."

Since the 1970s, California vintners have learned about where

the grape does well and how to farm and vinify it to get the best results. By the 1990s, California Chardonnays were known, at best, for fruit-forward, concentrated styles including tropical fruit flavors, and bold, rich wines with lavish oak and alcohol percentages that regularly topped 14%. At worst, they were overoaked, high-alcohol concoctions with notes of butter, toasted marshmallow and spice that overwhelmed the fruit within. A backlash against the grape was called the ABC movement, "Anything But Chardonnay."

By the 2000s and 2010s, a shift occurred, with more California producers reassessing their approaches and moving toward fresher, more restrained styles, largely driven by a broader interest in *terroir*

EDITOR'S TIP

The best Chardonnays from the Golden State age beautifully. Consider purchasing a handful of your favorite wines and cellar them to revisit periodically as they evolve, with more savory notes and additional expressions of vintage variations.

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Kistler winery overlooks the acclaimed Vine Hill Vineyard, among the producer's portfolio of sought-after Chardonnays.



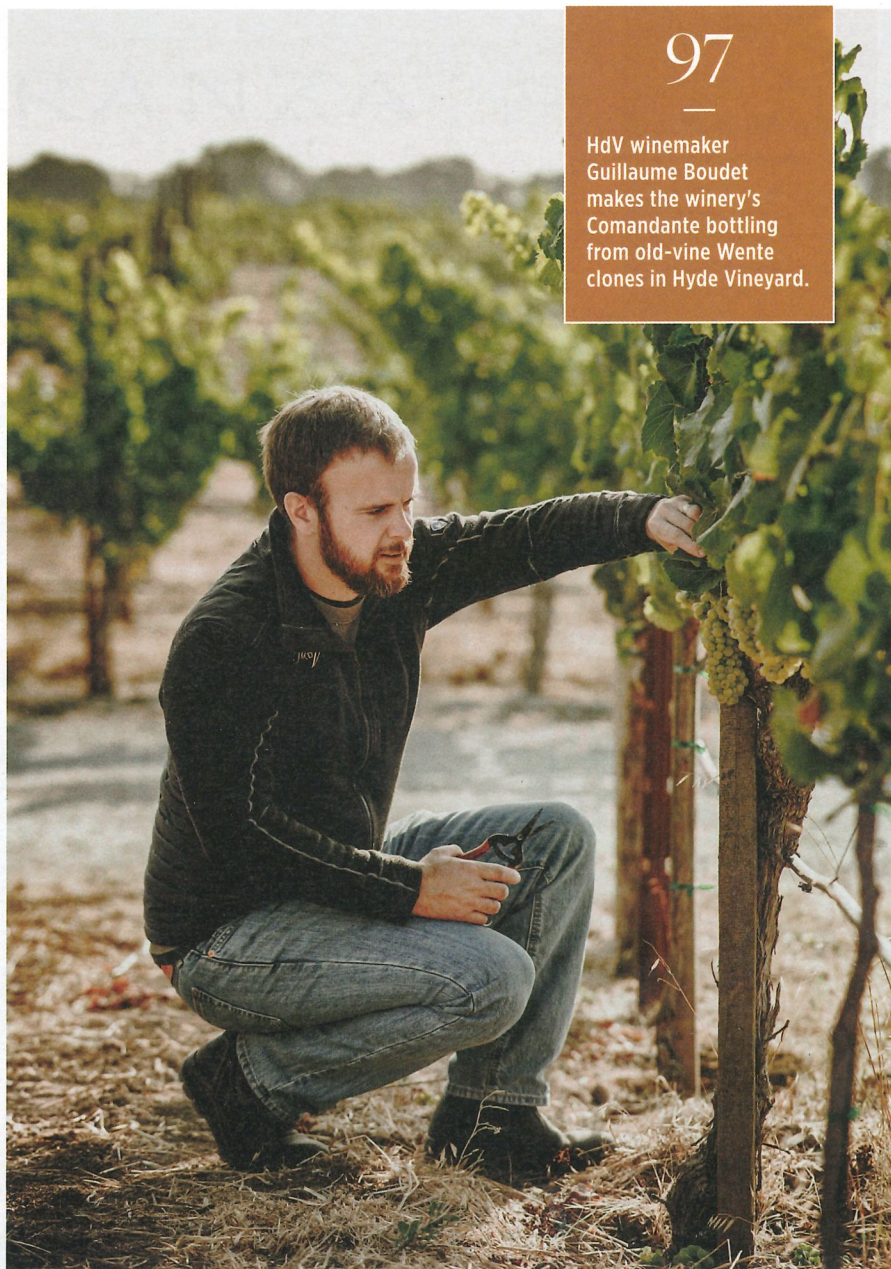
expression, sustainability and finesse in winemaking.

Today California Chardonnay encompasses a significant diversity of styles, ranging from the full-bodied, rich wines that have long been associated with the state to purer, more energetic versions that emphasize clarity and site. But here's what is remarkable; even the bolder Chardonnays today typically show more brightness and juicy qualities, as they evolved to reflect their own takes on current trends.

Winemakers openly discuss doing less in the cellar to allow the fruit and *terroir* to shine through more transparently. They emphasize the importance of precision, subtlety and avoiding overintervention—often reducing oak influence (including less oak use, larger oak containers and lower new oak percentages) and focusing on the intrinsic characteristics of the vineyard sites. Chardonnay has been known as “the winemaker’s grape” for how much it can transmit the winemaking choices, but these days, less is definitely more.

The move toward fresher styles means certain cool-climate regions stand out, such as Sonoma Coast, Santa Barbara County and pockets along the Central Coast. Winemakers are increasingly turning to specific, high quality vineyard sites that reflect the diversity of California’s varied *terroirs*. Regional blends are also stronger than ever, as winemakers tap into what makes each corner of the Golden State special. There is also more attention to clones—especially heritage clones—that have been propagated for freshness and intensity.

With winemakers paying careful attention to vineyard management, precise cellar work and a focus on the purity of the fruit, California Chardonnay is a compelling category now in a golden age.



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HdV winemaker
Guillaume Boudet
makes the winery's
Comandante bottling
from old-vine Wente
clones in Hyde Vineyard.

BEST OF CALIFORNIA CHARDONNAY

WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

SCORE	WINE	PRICE	SCORE	WINE	PRICE
97	AUBERT Chardonnay Carneros Larry Hyde & Sons 2021	\$95	95	AUBERT Chardonnay Sonoma Coast Powder House 2021	\$110
97	AUBERT Chardonnay Sonoma Coast Lauren 2022	\$150	95	FLOWERS Chardonnay Sonoma Coast Camp Meeting Ridge 2022	\$90
97	AUBERT Chardonnay Sonoma Coast Park Avenue 2022	\$110	95	HDV Chardonnay Napa Valley Hyde Vineyard 2021	\$85
97	AUBERT Chardonnay Sonoma Coast Powder House 2022	\$110	95	PAUL HOBBS Chardonnay Sonoma Mountain Richard Dinner Vineyard 2022	\$95
97	FERREN Chardonnay Sonoma Coast Frei Road Vineyard 2021	\$90	95	KISTLER Chardonnay Sonoma Mountain McCrea Vineyard Athearn Estate 2021	\$105
97	HDV Chardonnay Napa Valley Comandante Hyde Vineyard 2021	\$175	95	KISTLER Chardonnay Sonoma Valley Cuvée Cathleen Kistler Vineyard 2021	\$150
97	KISTLER Chardonnay Russian River Valley Laguna Ridge Vineyard 2021	\$225 (1.5L)	95	PETER MICHAEL Chardonnay Knights Valley Ma Belle-Fille 2022	\$130
97	KISTLER Chardonnay Russian River Valley Vine Hill Vineyard 2021	\$105	95	PETER MICHAEL Chardonnay Knights Valley Mon Plaisir 2022	\$115
96	AUBERT Chardonnay Napa Sugar Shack 2021	\$110	95	RAMEY Chardonnay Russian River Valley Rochioli Vineyard 2021	\$85
96	AUBERT Chardonnay Russian River Valley Eastside 2021	\$95	95	RAMEY Chardonnay Russian River Valley Westside Farms Estate 2021	\$85
96	AUBERT Chardonnay Sonoma Coast CIX 2022	\$125	95	ROCHIOLI Chardonnay Russian River Valley Rachael's Vineyard 2022	\$84
96	AUBERT Chardonnay Sonoma Coast UV-SL Vineyard 2022	\$100	95	THREE STICKS Chardonnay Sonoma Coast Gap's Crown Vineyard 2022	\$70
96	KISTLER Chardonnay Carneros Hyde Vineyard 2021	\$105	95	WAYFARER Chardonnay Fort Ross-Seaview Wayfarer Vineyard Cuvée Cleo 2022	\$175
96	KISTLER Chardonnay Sonoma Valley Durell Vineyard 2021	\$105			
96	PETER MICHAEL Chardonnay Knights Valley La Carrière 2022	\$115			
96	RAMEY Chardonnay Napa Valley Carneros Hyde Vineyard 2021	\$85			
95	AUBERT Chardonnay Sonoma Coast CIX 2021	\$115			