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California CHARDONNAY

ANNUAL TASTING REPORT



A DREAM VINTAGE FOR BRUNELLO
SUMMER SEAFOOD PAIRED WITH WINES
FRESH POURS FOR ROSÉ SEASON



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Photograph by
ALANNA HALE

CALIFORNIA CHARDONNAY Power & Finesse

Terroir-driven wines lead the charge to more refined and structured styles across the state

BY KIM MARCUS





California Chardonnay is decisively moving away from the days when big, buttery and oaky versions dominated the upper echelon of the market. The new generation of wines coming on the scene, defined by gentler fermentations and a lighter use of oak, is fostering an explosion of quality across the Golden State.

These wines display both power and elegance, with the best of them capable of long-term aging. They are made using traditional winemaking techniques drawn from France's Burgundy region, where Chardonnay reigns in prestigious appellations such as Corton-Charlemagne, Puligny-Montrachet and Meursault. Unabashed in their admiration for these white Burgundies, leading California vintners are seeking to express the characteristics they most appreciate in their own wines.

"From what I see and what I'm tasting, there's clearly a movement toward refinement and elegance without losing flavor or power," says vintner Paul Hobbs, who makes top-rated versions from Sonoma and Napa counties. "There was such a bad reputation for California Chardonnays, [especially] in Europe and Japan, but now people have really changed their opinion, that these are beauties with so much depth and complexity and balance. It's a pretty exciting time for Chardonnay—and I expect there's room for continued refinement."

Ferren's Matt Courtney sources his Silver Eagle Chardonnay from a vineyard on the Sonoma Coast, where cooling fog off the Pacific moderates the summer heat.

Echoing this opinion is David Ramey, who makes stellar wines from his home base in Sonoma's Russian River Valley. "Many producers have pulled back from the higher-alcohol, lower-acid, oak-driven style of the '90s and aughts," says Ramey, who was a pioneer of the Burgundian wine-making practices that are now predominant

among California's top producers of Chardonnay. Vintners, he explains, are harvesting a Brix or two earlier—referring to a measure of fruit ripeness—and using 20% new oak rather than 50%.

"One doesn't have to go to an extreme, making 12% alcohol, non-malo or tank-fermented Chards," Ramey says. "I do think that some folks still characterize California Chardonnay as big, oaky and buttery, but that's not really true anymore."

Quality is very high across the board in both of the vintages that dominate my tastings this year, 2018 and 2019, which comprise all but 30 of the wines in this report. Nearly 200 of the more than 400 wines I have reviewed in blind tastings since my previous report ("California Cool," July 31 & Aug. 31, 2020) earn outstanding scores of 90 points or higher, including 16 wines at the classic level of 95-plus. The 2018s are a bit more structured at this point, while the 2019s show an amazing depth of flavor. (Charts of Top Wines, Smart Buys and Solid Values begin on page 40; an alphabetical guide listing scores and prices for all wines tasted begins on page 44.)

Comparing the two vintages, Ramey sees them closely aligned, with 2018 slightly cooler. "People say '18 was a higher-yielding vintage, but our blocks came in about the same between the two," he says. "Slightly higher acidities in '18."

The influence of the coast is key to understanding how the Golden State can make such great Chardonnays. Almost all of the top-scoring wines come from within 15 miles of the Pacific. A significant benefit of coastal proximity is the fog that develops over cold ocean waters during the summer, spreading inland at nighttime and retreating during the day. Without this cooling influence and its moderating effect on the strong summer sun, growing high quality cool-climate grapes such as Chardonnay would be challenging at best and impossible at worst. Top wines from farther inland benefit from vineyards that are set on mountainsides and ridgetops.

Distance from the coast helps define the flavor continuum of Chardonnay. Typically, the closer a vineyard is to the coast, the crisper and more savory the wine. The diverse microclimates and soil types in which Chardonnay thrives up and down the length of California—from Santa Barbara County in the south to Mendocino County in the north—are important components in plotting the x-y axis of flavors and styles.

Most of the highest-rated and richest-tasting wines come at the juncture where the coastal influence, while still strong, is moderated by the warmth of the state's interior valleys. Such is the case with the top-scoring wine in this report, the spectacular Aubert Russian River Valley Eastside 2019 (97 points, \$85), which comes from a vineyard about 13 miles inland from the ocean on rolling uplands above the Russian River. This ripe, juicy version offers white fruit and tropical flavors that show ebullient toastiness.

Planted in 2006 by the skilled viticulturist Ulises Valdez, who died in 2018, the Eastside vineyard is rich with gravelly loams and volcanic-based soils that provide excellent drainage and exposure, according to owner and winemaker Mark Aubert. "The wine has so much *terroir*," Aubert says. "It features firm natural acidities at 15% alcohol, but it tastes like 14%."



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—DAVID RAMEY

David Ramey, an advocate for a more elegant style of Chardonnay, enjoys his wines with his wife, Carla, and their children, Claire and Alan.

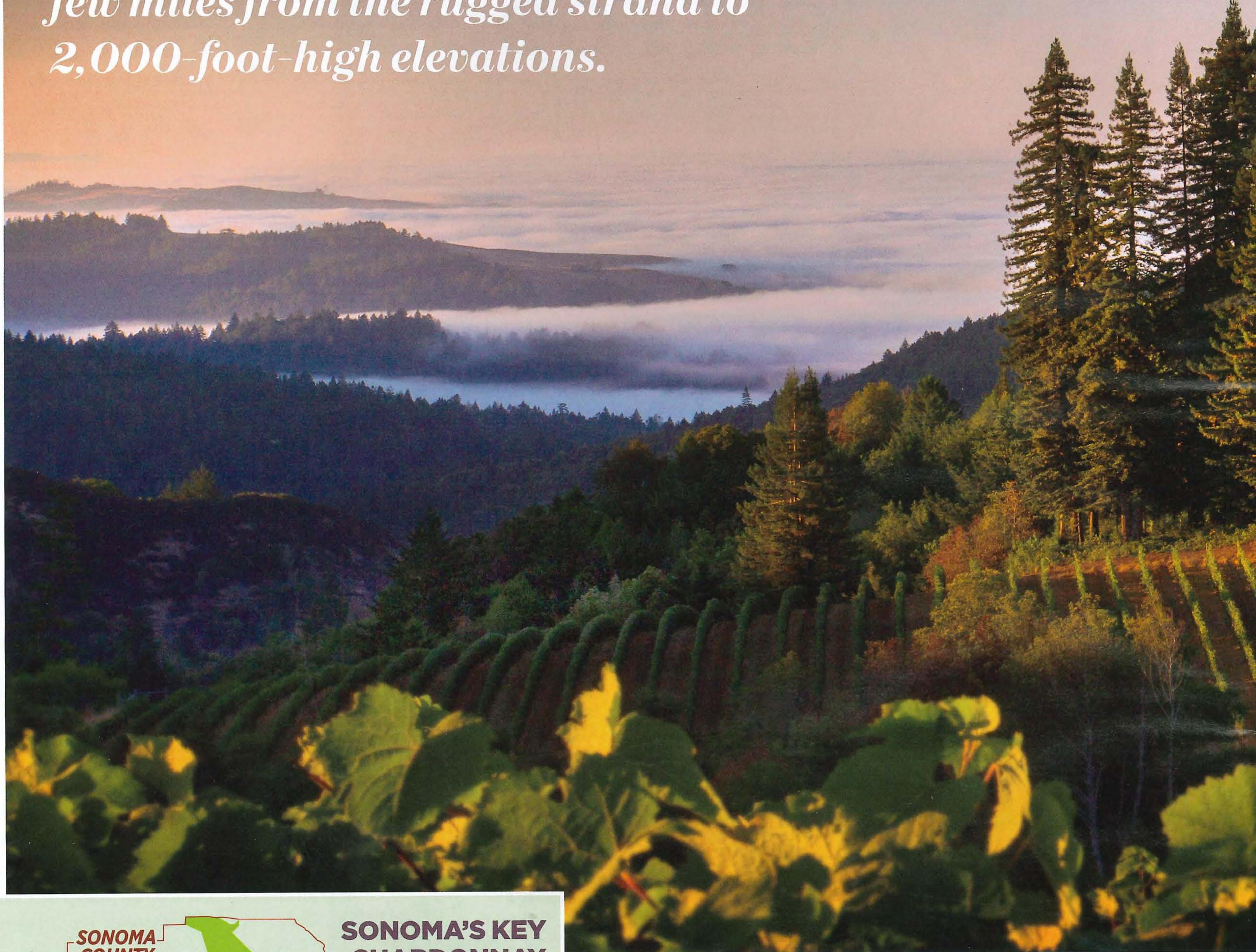
Some of the most dramatic vineyard settings in the state lie on the northern Sonoma coast. Here, at the edge of the continent, north of the mouth of the Russian River, vertiginous slopes rise a few miles from the rugged coastal strand to 2,000-foot-high elevations. This is the domain of the Fort Ross-Seaview appellation, which covers the southern portion of the area.

One of the leading vintners here is Cleo Pahlmeyer at Wayfarer. Her top release, the Wayfarer Vineyard 2019 (93, \$80), is emblematic of the district's quality, showing nervy flavors of citrus and green apple that are concentrated and well-structured, with savory minerality. "Our location just 4 miles from the coast brings focused acidity and refreshing minerality to the Chardonnay," Pahlmeyer says. "This coupled with the intensity of sunlight at Wayfarer, situated above the fog line at 1,100 feet, creates a depth of aromatics with density and length on the palate."

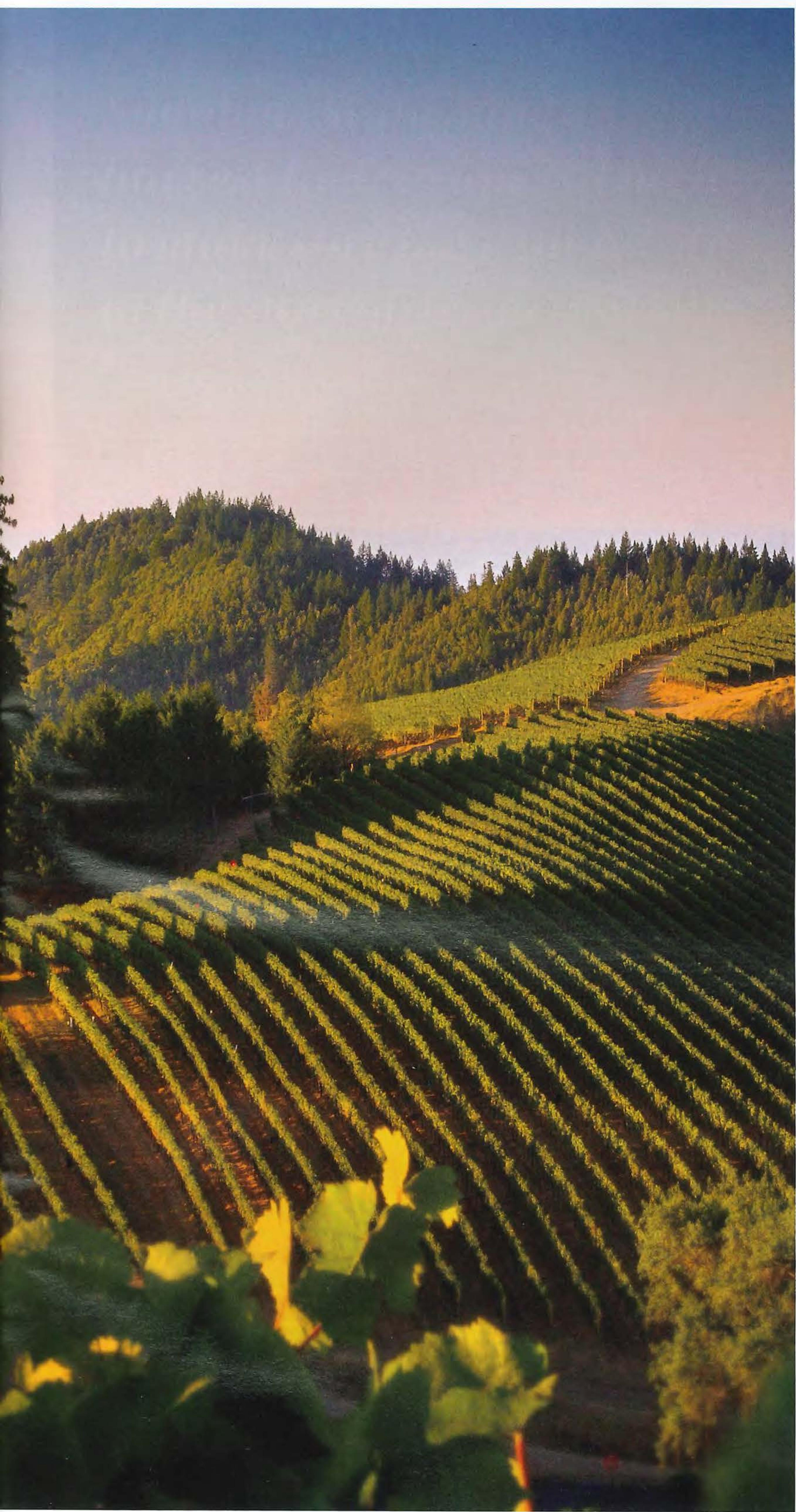
Aubert and many other vintners consider the 2019 vintage one of the best years in recent memory for Chardonnay. There was sufficient winter rainfall, followed by moderate summer temperatures with few heat spikes. Late-season wildfires didn't affect the Chardonnay crop because it had already been picked. "Nineteen was a great vintage with great yields," Aubert says. "It was a little more balanced and not as big of a crop as '18. There was no special winemaking on my part, just less new oak for young wines."

Aubert was firing on all cylinders in 2019, with five classic scorers among nine releases at 93 points or higher, all of them in

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his voluptuous and mouthfilling style. An excellent new addition to his stable is the Sonoma Coast Park Avenue (95, \$90), from a 12-acre vineyard that was formerly an apple orchard. Planted to grapes in 2015, the site is adjacent to another of Aubert's prime spots, his Lauren vineyard, located near the village of Forestville, south of the Russian River. Densely planted with 1,900 vines per acre, the parcel features a mix of two vine selections, 80% Old Wente and 20% Montrachet. Old Wente is a common denominator in many of California's greatest Chardonnay sites, and Aubert takes full advantage of its distinctive characteristics. "It's the most minerally clone we have and reflects natural acidity the best," he says. "We get savory notes not found in other wines."



Also leading the pack with classic-rated wines are perennial high-scorers such as Kistler (six at 95-plus), Arista (two), Ramey (two) and Paul Hobbs (one). Another 15 wines earned 94 points, with bottlings from these top performers as well as other well-known names such as DuMol, Ferren, Peter Michael, Ridge, Saxon Brown and Three Sticks. All in all, it's an impressive performance from California's leading Chardonnay houses, whose wines show stylistic depth and diversity, along with purity of flavor.

Ramey's two classic 2018s, the complex and minerally Russian River Valley Ritchie Vineyard (95, \$70) and the powerfully sleek and savory Carneros Hyde Vineyard (95, \$70), are hallmarks of the Ramey style, with firm backbones of acidity that should reward

long-term aging. Both are also prime examples of the quality that is spreading across Napa and Sonoma, the state's northern heartland for Chardonnay. The Carneros district of southern Napa rivals the Russian River Valley and Sonoma Coast in quality, though the number of Carneros wines is much smaller overall, reflecting the region's more compact size.

"At Ritchie, the old vines play a key role, planted in 1972, along with the classic Goldridge loam of the Russian River Valley," Ramey says, referring to the soil type that is common to many top vineyards in the region. "Hyde is a little warmer than Ritchie, being farther away from the gap in the coastal range—Estero Americano, now known as the Petaluma Gap—yet it always displays marked acidity due to the clay soils."

The excellence of Hyde is borne out by the other highly rated bottlings from the site, including Aubert's Larry Hyde & Sons 2019 (96, \$85), Kistler's Hyde Vineyard 2018 (95, \$90), HdV's Hyde Vineyard 2018 (93, \$75) and Patz & Hall's Hyde Vineyard 2018 (93, \$65).

Chardonnay is known as a winemaker's wine because of its diffuse primary fruit flavors, which can easily be molded or enriched in the cellar. In addition to pursuing vineyards closer to the coast and improving grape-growing practices (mostly through better clones or reduced yields), vintners have undertaken a range of winemaking innovations. One of the key changes has been to move away from warmer extractions during fermentation to cooler and gentler techniques, allowing the characteristics of each vineyard site to shine more clearly in the wines.

A leading adherent of this practice is Jeff Gaffner of Saxon Brown, a brand he founded in 1997 after working for 15 years at Chateau St. Jean under the guidance of Richard Arrowood. One of the Chardonnay sages of the time, Arrowood taught Gaffner that controlling temperatures for cooler fermentations is vital to making quality wines.

Gaffner cites the long, cold, over-the-winter fermentations in the cellars of Burgundy as inspiration for his own philosophy of making Chardonnay. His focus is on reducing the intensity of the compounds known as diacetyl, which are a byproduct of the secondary fermentation known as malolactic, or "malo," that marks an important turning point in the development of a young Chardonnay. Coming after the primary fermentation, which turns sugar into alcohol, the malolactic fermentation reduces sharpness and acidity. The warmer and faster the process, the more profound the influence of these compounds, which impart strong buttery flavors in the finished wine.

"I don't dislike diacetyl, but it masks a lot of other components," Gaffner says. "You can make a buttery diacetyl Chardonnay anywhere in California, but the challenge is to get the site signature into the Chardonnay, which is what I'm looking to do." His best effort in this regard is the Sonoma Coast Durell Vineyard 2017 (94, \$60), a well-structured version filled with creamy white fruit flavors backed by fresh acidity.

Reducing the influence of oak in the barrel—from the type of toasting used to cure the wood to the nature of the grain in its staves—is another evolving trend. "My goal is to showcase the site without getting run over by the fake butter characteristic," Gaffner

Rating California Chardonnay Vintages in Major Regions

	Carneros	Napa	Santa Barbara*	Sonoma	
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
2014	92	92	87	92	Drought produced spartan crop; fine quality, with yields the only disappointment
2013	93	93	88	93	An exceptional year, distinct for vibrancy and density; ageworthy

*Santa Barbara County, Sta. Rita Hills, Santa Maria Valley and Santa Ynez Valley AVAs

Note: Most California Chardonnays are ready to drink upon release.

A score range indicates preliminary analysis based on barrel samples and/or a limited sampling; many wines of the vintage not yet reviewed.

Vintage ratings: 95–100, classic; 90–94, outstanding; 85–89, very good; 80–84, good; 75–79, mediocre; 50–74, not recommended

explains. "This strategy also allows me to use a more elegant oak profile: tighter-grained and air-dried barrels. There's a fair amount in these wines, but it's more restrained."

Wines made in this style take more time to develop, and their flavor profiles tend to be less overtly powerful or rich. Instead, their strength derives from a purity of flavor propelled by fresh acidity that results in finesse and ageability, potentially 10 years in some cases.

For Hobbs, the push is to realize elegance, but not at the expense of fruit flavors or complexity. A vital decision for him is when to make the press cut—that is, when to stop pressing the grapes to extract the juice. Too little and there's not enough raw material to weave together into a memorable wine; too much and harsh elements from the skins and stems can dominate. It's an economic decision as well: The sooner the press cut, the lower the overall volume of wine.

The press cut was relatively short, at only two hours, for Hobbs' top-scoring Sonoma Coast Cuvée Louisa Goldrock Estate 2019 (95, \$125), filled with vibrant white and tropical fruit flavors bound by crisp minerality that borders on ethereal. Wines such as this represent a growing number of the top Chardonnays, requiring time to open up in the glass when young and to gain complexity as they age.

"We've been very fastidious about when to make the press cut, and while there's a little less extract, there's still plenty of flavor," Hobbs explains. "It's a very critical maneuver, and it's right on the edge. If you do it too soon, you have a light wine. We're pushing the limits when deciding whether there's too much intervention or not enough in making a balanced wine."

Hobbs is honing additional

techniques for the Cuvée Louisa and other Chardonnay bottlings. Instead of standard 225-liter *barriques*, he is increasingly working with large, 500-liter oak barrels known as *puncheons* to reduce oak influence, while using a lighter touch in toasting the barrels themselves and also reducing the frequency of *bâtonnage* (stirring of lees) during the fermentation and aging process. Like many other top producers, he harvests his grapes at night to make sure the fruit is cold at the start of fermentation.

Goldrock is a remote 42-acre vineyard in northern Sonoma, located about 5 miles from the Pacific surf and surrounded by redwood forests and oak woodlands. Featuring Goldridge soils, this relatively cold site is mostly planted to Pinot Noir, with only 3 acres to Chardonnay, making the Cuvée Louisa a single-vineyard

Saxon Brown's Jeff Gaffner tastes his outstanding Sonoma Chardonnays with his partner, Tracey Walker, at their winemaking facility in Santa Rosa.



Leading producers such as Sonoma estate Sangiacomo harvest their grapes at night to make sure the fruit is cold at the start of fermentation.



wine in the true Burgundian sense—meaning both small in size and *terroir*-specific.

Although many other top-rated Chardonnays also qualify as single-vineyard or vineyard-designated wines, not all of them adhere strictly to the Burgundian model, since most of California's well-known vineyards would dwarf anything in Burgundy. Hyde, for example, is nearly 200 acres, and 14 different wines in this report alone carry its moniker. On the South Coast, the Bien Nacido Vineyard is 800 acres, with 300 of them planted to Chardonnay. Renowned vineyard tracts in Sonoma such as Sangiacomo and Durell are also large. At most of these sites, individual vineyard rows and blocks are cultivated to the specific requirements of the winemaking client.

With 130 acres under vine, Durell is the centerpiece of Bill Price's Sonoma vineyard empire. Price also owns Kistler, Three Sticks and Gary Farrell wineries, along with the large Gap's Crown Vineyard, which is known mostly for Pinot Noir. Three Sticks' consulting winemaker Bob Cabral explains that Durell features a range of *terroirs* and exposures, from lowland parcels filled with gravels from an ancient riverbed to higher terrain composed of

rocky basalts from nearby volcanoes.

Cabral calls the Three Sticks Sonoma Coast Origin Durell Vineyard 2019 (94, \$60), with its rich acidity backing crisp white fruit, citrus and savory mineral flavors, one of the most memorable Chardonnays he's made. He credits the 2019 vintage overall, but is unable to pinpoint any particular reason the Durell excelled except for the pedigree of the vines themselves, which, he says, are older and "self-regulating."

"As I work more and more with the same blocks up on the ridge, they impart a real textural component in the wines," Cabral explains. "It's the volcanic clays and gravels that give lemon drop notes, with more subtle flavors of Asian pears and nectarines, but not fruit-forward."

Rich textures and subtle flavors, whether it be fruit or butter or spice, is the name of the game these days for a growing cadre of Chardonnay vintners across California. Both the 2018 and 2019 vintages delivered a wealth of wines to explore in this style, with the promise of many more to come.

Senior editor Kim Marcus is Wine Spectator's lead taster on California Chardonnay.