

Napa Valley *Register*

From Ancien to Trefethen, Star/NVV Tasting Panel reviews Napa Valley Chardonnays

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Very few acres of Chardonnay remained in California after Prohibition. Not that it won any popularity contests before that momentous event either; we just weren't that into Chardonnay.

With almost 93,500 acres in California today, and 6,445 in Napa Valley, the grape has sped past the top whites of lore leaving the likes of Chenin Blanc and Riesling in its wake.

How did it get to be queen bee in Napa Valley?

It had a rocky start. Chardonnay came to the U.S. burdened with an identity crisis. It was long confused with Pinot Blanc and took on multiple spellings: Chardenai, Chardonay, Pinot Chardonnay, Pinot blanc Chardonnay, and White Pinot. Inglenook had "White Pinot" planted on their estate in 1889.

It wasn't until the late 1930s-40s that the University of California started to recommend Chardonnay for the production of quality table wine, and yet Napa Valley growers were slow to warm to the grape. Its small yields and affinity to viruses are thought to be two of the main reasons.

Slowly, Chardonnay started to appear in Napa Valley. In 1947, the McCreas brought their love of white Burgundies to Spring Mountain and started to plant Chardonnay at Stony Hill. There were only 200 acres of the grape in all of California at the time, and the University of California urged the McCreas to diversify; hedging their bets against Chardonnay. The McCreas produced their first Stony Hill Chardonnay vintage in 1952, and the wine's popularity takes on historic proportions today.

Renowned vintner John Kongsgaard worked at Stony Hill before creating an unfiltered Chardonnay at Newton Vineyard. While Louis M. Martini Winery became known for its Chardonnay, the fruit was from the acclaimed Monte Rosso site on the Sonoma side of the Mayacamas Mountains.

Still, Chardonnay's rise was not yet secure. Until 1968, its acreage was being reported by the California Department of Food and Agriculture as part of the "Miscellaneous" category in its statistical reports. Even more unfathomable, at the time of the Paris tasting (1976), Chardonnay was still being called Pinot Chardonnay in the Napa County Crop Reports.

But with the style of white wine in general moving into high fashion, and the Paris Tasting putting the icing on the cake, success (and a defined identity) finally came to Chardonnay, making it Napa Valley's top white wine.

At the latest St. Helena Star and Napa Valley Vintner Tasting Panel session, local winemakers and other trade people tasted through four flights of current Napa Valley Chardonnays (2016, 2017) and considered the latest styles and differences between the two vintages.

On Napa Valley's current Chardonnay style, Master of Wine Peter Marks reported, "It's hard to find a Napa style: there is less oak overall, but all styles can be found here."

Jamie Jamison of Brix Restaurant noted, "The balance was great to see; not a lot of high alcohols and the oak was in balance – really fun to see."

On the vintage differences, there were fans for each overarching style: Sarah Linnemeyer from Louis Martini/EJ Gallo liked the tropical ripeness of the 2017s and preferred them over the 2016s. Elizabeth

DeLouise-Gant, winemaker at Conn Creek Napa Valley, agreed regarding the flavors of the 2017s, commenting, “[they] moved to tropical [flavors] – almost muscat-ey; I prefer the 2016s.”

Asked which wines he would stock, Michael Martin, general manager of Market Restaurant in St. Helena, stated, “I would buy them all,” finding lots of floral aromas in the 2016s, and noticing more oak use in the 2017s.

Jon Emmerich, winemaker at Silverado Vineyards, commented on Chardonnay’s needy nature, “It’s hard, it’s very expensive to make Chardonnay in Napa Valley. There is a lot of hands-on work in the vineyard. With some other varieties, you may machine pick, and some grapes like Sauvignon Blanc can be cropped a bit heavier; but with Chardonnay, you try not to over-crop.”

He continued, “In the winery, you put the wine in barrels; stir the barrels; [etc] ... it’s labor intensive – adding costs, costs, costs at every step.” Prices of the Napa Valley Chardonnay wines from the tasting ranged from \$20-\$65.

With a mix of styles (citrus to tropical fruit; lightly oaked to spicy vanilla and toast character), the panelists found lots of Napa Valley Chardonnays to love. Here are their top picks of the tasting:

- **Ancien 2016 Chardonnay Los Carneros (\$38)** is full of nutty, rich red apple, pear and pineapple flavors with bright acid and a long, lingering finish.
- **J. McClelland 2016 Chardonnay Oak Knoll District (\$35)** has the aromas of heady, just-picked red apples made complex by toasted pears and baking spices.
- **Keenan Winery 2017 Chardonnay Spring Mountain District (\$37)** makes its aroma entrance with toast, sweet baking spices and baked apples lifted by bright juicy lemon and an intriguing white pepper-ginger touch on the finish.
- **Trefethen Family Vineyards 2017 Chardonnay Oak Knoll District (\$38)** is a lemon fest with vibrant lemon and lemon peel flavors on a crisp, mouthwatering palate.

Also top-rated:

- **Bouchaine Vineyards 2016 Estate Chardonnay Los Carneros (\$35)** is fruit-forward with intense red apple and pear fruit aromas joined by a hint of fresh spring grass leading to a glycerol-rich ribbon of guava-pineapple-apple flavors on the palate.
- **Laird Family Estate 2016 Cold Creek Ranch Los Carneros (\$30)** entices you with wafts of vanilla, caramel, toast, juicy pear, ripe peach and pineapple with a spicy oak finish.
- **Castello di Amorosa 2017 Reserve Chardonnay Napa Valley (\$58)** It’s not just me, right? You see that Castello di Amorosa constantly appears on our panelists’ winning wine lists? Toasted nuts, pear, red apple and guava fruit finish with the zing of white pepper spice.
- **Pine Ridge Vineyards 2017 Collines Vineyard Napa Valley (\$48)** is full of richly delicious red apple and Asian pear flavors for those who love the tasty weight of Chardonnay.