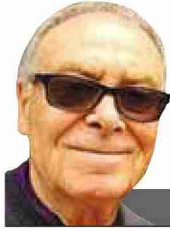


New releases expand the boundaries of traditional California-style chardonnay



LYLE W. NORTON
ON THE VINE

Chardonnay is the most widely planted grape varietal in the United States and has been for more than a decade. Most of it is planted in California which, in 2017, claimed over 93,000 acres under vine, resulting in 614,000 tons of fruit. Its dominance in California over the past fifty years has stunted the market demand for other white varietals, leaving many to survive in obscurity.

While there is no debate regarding popularity, discussion of chardonnay revolves around two styles: oaked or unoaked. Although nuance distinguishes fine chardonnay releases, those aged in stainless steel or neutral oak tend to be more acidic and crisp with citrus and stone fruit flavors, while those aged in oak generally have a richer mouthfeel with toasty or buttery characteristics.

For the last several decades, California chardonnay has been identified as riper, with a high fruit flavor profile, while the Old World Burgundian wines from villages like Chablis and Montrachet express minerality and more earthy qualities.

One of the pioneers of California chardonnay, David Ramey, introduced Burgundian techniques like sur lie aging, malolactic fermentation and barrel fermentation that produced a softer, richer mouthfeel and fruit-driven flavors. Many wine-makers followed his example and, by the mid-nineties, new trends in California chardonnay were set.

Today, there is a shift to dial back the ripened fruit and buttery style for something more austere and balanced. A fine example is the **2016 Ramey Chardonnay Rochioli Vineyard Russian River Valley (\$65)**

from a neighboring Westside Road vineyard outside of Healdsburg. Ramey has sourced chardonnay from the Rochioli Vineyard for years, but this wine is only the second vintage as a vineyard-designate release. Whole-cluster pressed with full malolactic fermentation and sur lie (yeast lees) aging and batonnage (stirring the yeast lees), it is rich, fruit forward with a healthy acidity.

Sonoma County still produces, from vintage to vintage, some of the finest examples of California-style chardonnay. William Selyem, in the heart of the esteemed Russian River Valley, recently released their 2017 vintage single-vineyard wines including the **2017 Lewis MacGregor Estate Vineyard Chardonnay (\$65)**. Ripened stone fruit, citrus and floral notes drive the aromatics and flavors with a clear and lush minerality that lingers through the finish.

From the same appellation, the **2017 Raeburn Russian River Valley Chardonnay (\$20)**, awarded ninety points from James Suckling, imparts the textural and flavorful complexity of a California chardonnay at a value price.

The Sonoma Coast is a very large and diverse appellation, extending from vineyards in north Sonoma County coastal regions near Annapolis, through the Sebastopol Hills and Petaluma Gap to far eastern vineyards near the town of Sonoma. Among them, the Gap's Crown Vineyard in the Petaluma Gap area lies inland, but has significant coastal influences. The recently released **2017 Passalacqua Gap's Crown Vineyard Chardonnay (\$52)**, with expressive fruit-driven flavors, is dry, but rounded on the palate.

From a well-sourced vineyard in the eastern reaches of the appellation, the **Sojourn Chardonnay Sonoma Coast Durrell Vineyard 2017 (\$48)** delivers complex fruit flavors with savory and mineral notes throughout.

Two chardonnay releases from diverse Napa Valley appellations,

the **Stony Hill Napa Valley Chardonnay (\$54)** from the high-altitude Spring Mountain District and the **Failla Chardonnay Coombsville Haynes Vineyard 2017 (\$58)**, in the southeastern portion of the valley, offer fine samples of modern California chardonnay.

The Stony Hill, considered one of California's early "cult wines," combines delicate fruit and floral characters with savory notes that makes it food friendly. The Failla Coombsville release expresses creamy, ripened stone and tropical fruit that results in an extraordinary mouthfeel.

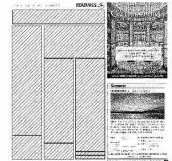
The Santa Cruz Mountain appellation has a long track record of producing fine California chardonnay. The Thomas Fogarty Winery near Woodside often falls under the radar, but their **Thomas Fogarty Santa Cruz Mountains Chardonnay 2016 (\$35)** has received accolades from all major periodicals including *Jeb*

Dunnuck, which described "orchard fruits, white flowers and subtle toasty, brioche-scented aromas and flavors."

Sourced from the Sierra Madre and Bien Nacido Vineyards in Santa Barbara County, the **2016 Rusack Santa Maria Valley Reserve Chardonnay (\$36)**, with full malolactic fermentation, batonnage and barrel fermentation, expressed, at a recent tasting, classic stone fruit and citrus flavors with textural elements that lingered throughout the finish.

With its continued popularity, there are always a plethora of diverse California chardonnay choices readily available to consumers from vineyards throughout the state. Whether it is a crisp, dry wine aged in stainless steel or one heavily oaked and buttery, some research and tasting can help discover the one that is compatible to your palates and food choices.

Lyle W. Norton is a wine enthusiast and



*blogger in Santa Rosa who has written
a wine column for 15 years. Visit his blog*

*at www.lifebylyle.com or email him at
sfewine@gmail.com. He is a guest columnist.*



David Ramey

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