



CHARDONNAY PICKS for December

by Charles M. Bear Dalton



Chardonnay is and has been the best selling category of wine in the US. So why don't we see more on Chardonnay in the wine press? The simple answer is that Chardonnay is out of favor with "wine geeks" which includes many in the wine trade and most members of the wine press. And yes, I am a wine geek. I am also pragmatic and I happen to like Chardonnay. I think it pairs great with crab (especially crab cakes) roast pork and veal dishes, and with a lot of mushroom dishes. Why don't I serve it more at my house? Simply because my wife prefers either sparkling wine or red wine and will rarely drink more than a glass of Chardonnay.

Having noted all of that, I will admit that I don't like all Chardonnay and that I understand both how Chardonnay got a bad name and why many people have been unable to embrace or maybe re-embrace Chardonnay. Lower priced Chardonnays made with too much oak flavor (whether from barrels or inner staves or wood chips) and full malo-lactic fermentation were the turn off that started the ABC (Anything But Chardonnay) movement back in the late 1980s. Lots of fat, woody, milky, creamy, oaky-vanilla, high alcohol wines that lacked freshness and fruit were on the market. Some of these still exist but there are now plenty of fresh, lively, bright fruit oriented, clean chardonnays showing minerally terroir notes and restrained (or no) oak flavors and/or malo-lactic flavors.

Here are 18 fine Chardonnays, most offering a good bang for your wine buying buck, selected from over 120 tasted over the last few months.

CREME De LYS Chardonnay, California, 2010

12x750ml \$9.19 \$102.48

Tech: 13.5% Alcohol. 95% Chardonnay with 2.5% Malvasia Bianca and 2.5 Pinot Blanc. 75% of the juice in small oak barrels for complexity and 25% percent in stainless steel tanks and aged on the yeast lees to develop the silky texture. Straw in color, and with good legs; dry, medium-bodied with freshly balanced acidity. Crisp and lovely with lots of citrus and some tropical fruit. Crisp, fresh, and refreshing. Well integrated. Tastes like Chardonnay (not all do). Very easy to drink and like. Spec's Score: 89.

BLACKBURN Chardonnay, Santa Barbara County, 2009

12x750ml \$11.99 \$134.98

Tech Note: 13.8% Alcohol. A unique blend of 95% Chardonnay and 5% Grenache Blanc. The chardonnay is fermented and aged 16 months in stainless steel tanks while the Grenache Blanc fermented and aged in French oak barrels (40% new). Medium-straw in color with well formed legs; quite dry, medium full-bodied with fresh acidity and very light phenolics. Very ripe, old school but unoaked Chardonnay. Good color, good acid balance. Ripe tropical and citrus fruit with a mineral note. Very nice Chardonnay that kept drawing me back. Tastes like there is a little skin contact (probably the source of the phenolic note.) Spec's Score: 89.

JOSEPH CARR Chardonnay, Sonoma Coast, 2009

12x750ml \$16.39 \$184.32

Tech: 13.9% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay barrel fermented with full malolactic and aged on the lees for 8 months in French oak barrels (100% new) with regular lees stirring. Yellow-gold in color with well formed legs; dry, medium full-bodied with softly balanced acidity and light phenolics. Big ripe, supple old style Chardonnay but still has plenty of fruit (soft tropical and tree fruit) with butter, vanilla, and wood. Spec's Score: 89.

JOSH CELLARS Chardonnay, North Coast, 2009

12x750ml \$11.89 \$131.08

Tech: 13.9% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay barrel fermented and 5 months of sur lie aging in small French and American oak barrels with a large part going through malolactic fermentation. Golden straw in color with good legs; dry, full-bodied with softly balanced acidity. Still old school. Buttery, fat, soft. Very rich and ripe tropical character. Lots of butter, oak, and vanilla. Unusual at this low a price. Spec's Score: 89.

DECOY Chardonnay, Sonoma County, 2009

12x750ml \$17.59 \$197.49

Tech Note: 14.1% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay from Dry Creek, Alexander Valley, and Russian River Valley appellations fermented and aged 50% in oak barrel (30% new) and 50% in stainless steel tanks. Straw in color with well formed legs; dry, medium-bodied with balanced acidity. Supple, easy to drink Chardonnay and easy to like. Lots of soft juicy ripe citrus and tree fruit with just a hint of tropical. enough oak to add richness and complexity but not enough to distract. Hint of mushroom earth. Decoy is the value-priced range from Duckhorn. Spec's Score: 89. Recommended

RUED Winery Chardonnay, Sonoma County, 2009

12x750ml \$19.19 \$215.94

Tech Note: 14.5% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay Fermented and aged in 2nd and 3rd use French oak for 8 months. Stirred on the lees in barrels. 100% Malolactic fermentation. Straw in color with well formed legs; dry, Medium-bodied with refreshing acidity. Clean, classic Chardonnay. Lots of fresh fruit in the citrus and tropical range. Lemon with a hint of pineapple. No oak flavor and subtle malo but there is a mineral component to add a bit of complexity. Spec's Score: 89+. Recommended.

HEALDSBURG RANCHES "Unoaked" Chardonnay, Sonoma County, 2009' 12x750ml \$11.39 \$128.25

Tech Note: 13.9% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay fermented in 100% stainless steel with 50% malolactic. Straw in color with well formed legs; dry, medium full-bodied with freshly balanced acidity. Supple and rich but not with oak. Rather, the the fruit (a mix of tropical and citrus) is ripe, the ML adds weight and there is a bit of a leesy richness as well. Very drinkable and satisfying Chardonnay with no heaviness. Healdsburg Ranches is a new winery from Bill Hambrecht who founded and later sold Belvedere. Spec's Score: 90.

MARKHAM VINEYARDS Chardonnay, Oak Knoll AVA, 2009

12x750ml \$13.29 \$149.18

Tech Note: 13.8% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay 100% Estate grown, produced, bottled. 100% Whole Cluster. 100% Barrel fermented. 9 months barrel aged (30% New) 1/3 malolactic. Green straw in color with well formed legs; dry, medium-bodied with freshly balanced acidity. Fresh citrus and tree fruit. Fresh style rather than oaky but it has enough richness. Fine Food Chardonnay. Spec's Score: 90. Highly recommended.

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MORGAN Santa Lucia Highlands Chardonnay, Santa Lucia highlands, 2009 12x750ml \$21.84 \$242.42

Tech Note: 14.2% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay whole cluster pressed and fermented and aged 9-and-1/2 months in French oak barrels (25% new) with partial malolactic fermentation. Straw in color with well formed legs; dry, medium-bodied with fresh acidity. Bright and fresh with lots of ripe citrus and some Monterey-typical tropical fruit. Lots of freshness along with the oak and subtle malolactic. Spec's Score: 90. Yum. Pushes all the right buttons.

DRY CREEK VINEYARDS Foggy Oak Chardonnay, Russian River Valley, 2008 12x750ml \$15.99 176.89

Tech Note: 13.5% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay fermented in older French oak barrels (30% new) with full malolactic. After the wine is blended, it is aged 14 months in French oak barrels, (30% of which are new). Yellow-straw in color with well formed legs stains the glass; dry, medium-bodied with balanced acidity. Clean and classic. Lots of soft malolactic Chardonnay character but in balance. Lemon and some tree fruit with long supple oak. Easy to Like. Spec's Score: 90. From parrot-head and son-in-law-of-a-sailor Don Wallace.

WITNESS TREE Chardonnay, Willamette Valley, 2009 12x750ml \$16.99 \$190.32

Tech Note: 14.4% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay estate grown, hand harvested, dry farmed. 80% 10-15 year old Dijon clone and 20% 30 year old Davis 108. Fermented and aged in 100% neutral French oak for 14 months with 100% malolactic fermentation. 300 cases produced. Medium-straw in color with nice legs; dry, medium-bodied with fresh acidity. Supple but quite mineraly Chardonnay with restrained fruit and an elegant style. As Burgundian as new world Chardonnay gets. Citrus and tee fruit with just a hint of tropical. Spec's Score: 90+. Highly recommended.

GALLO Signature Series Chardonnay, Russian River Valley, 2009 6x750ml \$22.79 \$128.32

Tech: 14.6% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay [Clones 96, 131 and 4 from the Laguna Ranch (89%) and Del Rio (11%) vineyards] whole cluster pressed, barrel fermented with full malolactic fermentation and sur lie aging for 15 months in a mixture of French and American oak barrels. Gold-straw in color with well formed legs; dry, medium full-bodied with freshly balanced acidity and very light phenolics. Full Burgundian treatment Chardonnay with lots of fruit, oak, and earth but all in a well integrated package. The full range of fruit (citrus, tropical, and tree) layers in with supple oak and mushroomy, mineraly earth. Long, rich, and satisfying. Spec's Score: 91.

CROSS BARN (by Paul Hobbs) Chardonnay, Sonoma Coast, 2008 12x750ml \$28.69 \$322.08

Tech Note: 14.3% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay. The whole-clusters were pressed and the juice was fermented 60% fin tank and 40% in oak barrels using both native and selected yeasts. It got 100% malolactic fermentation and was then aged five months in French oak barrels before being bottled with no fining. Yellow gold straw in color with well formed legs; dry, medium full-bodied with freshly balanced acidity and a very long finish. Supple, rich, but in focus Chardonnay. Earthy and lots of mixed citrus, tree, and tropical fruit. Earth and oak are nicely integrated. Bear Note: Quite satisfying. Super Crab Cake Chardonnay. Spec's Score: 92.

SHAFER Chardonnay "Red Shoulder Ranch", Napa Valley - Carneros, 2009 12x750ml \$44.49 \$489.38

Tech Note: 14.9% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay. Whole-cluster pressed and fermented with wild yeast in individual barrels (75% new French oak barrels (Allier and Vosges) and 25% in stainless steel barrels) with no malolactic fermentation from 14 months. Yellow in color with well formed legs; dry, medium-bodied with freshly balanced acidity and very light phenolics. Supple, soft, ripe but still focused Chardonnay offering tropical and ripe citrus. Bear Note: classic, old school with a twist. Delicious. Spec's Score: 92.

PINE RIDGE Chardonnay "Dijon Clone", Carneros, Napa Valley, 2008 12x750ml \$24.69 \$278.01

Tech Note: 14.1% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay (from closely planted -vineyards with devigorating rootstocks grafted to Dijon clones 76, 95 and 96) barrel fermented using no malolactic and aged 9 months in 100% French oak barrels (33% new) with regular battonage (lees stirring). Yellow-straw in color with well-formed legs; dry, medium-full-bodied with fresh acidity and a long finish. Lovely texture and supple feel with fine mushroom earth under its tropical and citrus fruit. Classic Carneros. Quite delicious. Spec's Score: 92+.

ROBERT CRAIG Chardonnay, Sonoma Valley, 2009 6x750ml \$47.78 \$269.01

Tech Note: 14.5% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay from the Durrell Vineyard. Fermentation: 60% in French oak (10% new and 90% neutral) and 40% in stainless steel. 20% of the fermentation used native (natural) yeast. Gold-straw in color with well formed legs; dry, medium full-bodied with fresh acidity and very light phenolics. Offers supple mushroomy earth. Classic Chardonnay with rich but focused flavor. Tree and tropical fruit with a bit of citrus. Supple texture and fine feel. Fresh despite its richness. Delicious. Pushes the right buttons. Spec's Score: 92+.

AUTEUR Chardonnay Durrell Vineyard, Sonoma Coast, 2009 12x750ml \$38.94 \$439.20

Tech Note: 14% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay from the Durell Vineyard barrel fermented and aged in all French oak barrels (25% new) with no malolactic. Yellow in color with well formed legs; dry, medium full-bodied with balanced acidity; light phenolics. Deep and rich with lots of oak and terroir under brighter, cooler fruit. Bear Note: Delicious, juicy, succulent and thrilling Chardonnay. Spec's Score: 93+.

HANZELL VINEYARDS "Sebella" Chardonnay, Sonoma Valley, 2009 12x750ml \$31.29 \$351.36

Tech Note: 14% Alcohol. 100% estate bottled Chardonnay aged 8 months in 1 and 2 year old French oak with no malolactic fermentation. Straw in color with good legs; dry, medium full-bodied with fresh acidity. Starts lean and lemony but gets richer; nevertheless, it leans toward a Burgundian style. Lots of mineral but the clean, ripe mostly citrus fruit is there along with subtle well integrated oak nuance. Pure, elegant, and lovely; delicious. Has an almost Riesling sort of balance. Spec's Score: 94. ✨

