



Chardonnay

by Charles M. Bear Dalton

A few weeks ago, I wrote about “The Wines We Drink” and I sited some numbers as to which were the best selling categories of wine at Spec’s. In units sold, wine labeled Chardonnay is far and away the best selling wine category. Last year, wines labeled Chardonnay accounted for 1,917,908 units (16.78%) of all the wines purchased from Spec’s (11,431,339 units total). Please note, that although many countries make wine labeled Chardonnay, this Chardonnay figure does not include blends (although most Chardonnay is 100% Chardonnay) or regionally labeled wines like Puligny Montrachet or Pouilly Fuisse (another 57,766 bottles). These are only the wines that include the name Chardonnay on the label.

So if Chardonnay is so popular with consumers, why is there so much less press and wine trade buzz about it than _____ (fill in the blank with Riesling, Syrah, Malbec, Pinot Noir, Pinot Grigio, etc.)? A few years ago, there was a backlash against a certain style of Chardonnay (oaky, very ripe fruit, lots of milky-creamy-buttery malolactic character) that spawned an informal movement that got legs because of a cute name: ABC, which stands for “Anything But Chardonnay”. ABC drinkers seemed to champion other varietals and soon began also rejecting Cabernet and Merlot wines. From this, ZAP (Zinfandel Advocates & Producers) was born. Gradually, Cabernet, and to a lesser extent Merlot, returned to their old form but, at least in trade and press circles, Chardonnay languished and ABC came again to mean literally anything but Chardonnay.

Despite the lack of trade and press buzz, Chardonnay never faltered with consumers. It is still hot and may be poised to grow some more. In mid October while in Napa Valley, I saw several women sporting “cougar juice” T-shirts referencing Rombauer Chardonnay (also known as “cougar bait”). I’m not certain if Rombauer is officially onboard with this but it can’t be hurting their sales. The point is that there is a certain demographic that has embraced both the idea of being a “Cougar” (if not the practice) and the flavor of Chardonnay. They, along with a lot of other folks, are buying and drinking a lot of Chardonnay.

So what is Chardonnay? Chardonnay is a grape variety that gained its fame as the high quality white grape of Burgundy producing the wines of Puligny Montrachet, Pouilly Fuisse, and Chablis to name three of the dozens of possible Chardonnay appellations in France. Chardonnay is also a wine made from that grape that is available in a range of styles running between two extremes. Chardonnay is a bit of a chameleon as it takes on whatever the winemaker throws at it. It can be oaky or pristine. Its fruit can be pure lemon or all pineapples and bananas or a combination of both and anything in between. Chardonnay can express buttery, milky notes even when it has not gone through malolactic fermentation. Almost unique among white wines, Chardonnay can express tannins which are usually from the oak barrels but can come from skin contact.

The style of Burgundy’s Cote d’Or is generally barrel fermented and aged with a mix of from 20% to as much as 100% new barrels and full malo-lactic fermentation that takes place in the barrel as winter turns to spring in the year following the vintage. The barrel aging can be as short as 8 months or as long as 21 months. This style is referred to by many as the full Burgundian treatment. These wines are usually made from grapes grown in the best sites (often a lower yield levels) and often show a well-integrated, balanced, complex mix of fruit, oak, and mineral-earth flavors.



The other end of the range, more typically found in Burgundy’s Macon region (and other lower-priced Chardonnays from around the world) ferments and ages (albeit briefly) the Chardonnay in tanks (usually temperature controlled stainless steel) and sulfurs the wine to stop malo-lactic fermentation from ever starting. These no-oak, no-ML wines (aka “no-no wines”) are often made from grapes grown at higher yield levels that give less terroir character. Consequently, the focus here is on fresh fruit flavors with perhaps some mineral-earth notes showing through but little or no discernable oak.

The “UC Davis cookbook Chardonnay recipe” sometimes referred to by older California winemakers points to temperature-controlled tank fermentation with no ML followed by barrel aging with a smaller percentage of new oak. Some of the classics of California Chardonnay including Ch. Montelena, Mayacamas, Stony Hill, and Hanzell have followed or still follow this recipe. Despite their success and long term age-worthiness. Most higher end California Chardonnay producers follow the “full Burgundian treatment” with at least partial ML and lots of new oak. In actual practice, all three of these production techniques are used to-the-letter but there are lots of hybrids as well. Some do full ML and lees stirring but no oak. Some do barrel fermentation and oak aging but no lees stirring. Some barrel ferment but in stainless steel barrels rather than oak barrels. Some do part of the blend in tank and part in barrel. Knowing all the technique that is used by a particular winemaker to make a specific wine can give you a pretty good idea what sort of wine the winery is trying to make but nothing replaces tasting.

Malo-lactic Fermentation (also known as “ML”) is the second fermentation almost all red wines and many white wines go through after the sugar is fermented into alcohol. A group of lactic acid bacteria (*Oenococcus oeni*, and various species of *Lactobacillus* and *Pediococcus*) - as opposed to yeasts - induce this fermentation in which some or all of the natural malic (apple) acid found in the grape juice is converted to lactic (milk) acid. This change is called a fermentation because, like the sugar/alcohol fermentation, the by-products are heat and carbon-dioxide.

When you go to a winery and see barrels with glass bungs set upside down on the bung holes, you are seeing wines going through or just finishing ML in the barrel. As carbon-dioxide pressure builds in the barrel, it lifts the bung slightly allowing the gas to escape and the pressure to equalize.

White wines that have undergone a full or partial malo-lactic fermentation exhibit more richness in the mouth with a milky or creamy feel. Many of the most popular new world Chardonnays of the last 20 years have exhibited a strong ML character. A winemaker may block ML in some or all of a particular wine so that a stronger impression of acidity and more of a fresh fruit character will remain in the finished wine. Wines with blocked or unfinished ML must be sterile filtered to avoid the risk of a malo-lactic fermentation starting in the bottle after the wine is ready for sale.

Knowing about ML is important as more and more new world Chardonnay producers are eschewing oak barrels and blocking ML to create fresher, more lively wines with less heaviness and more fruit. Lots of wines will say “un-wooded” on the front or back labels where a blocked or partial ML may be noted on the back label or maybe only on a tech sheet posted on a winery’s website. Understanding the flavor and texture ramifications of ML gives you a better idea of what a full ML wine tastes like versus a partial ML wine or a non-ML wine.



Here are some of the best Chardonnays I have tasted of late.

**BEACON HILL Leo's Block Chardonnay, Yamhill-Carlton
AVA Willamette Valley, 2007**

12x750ml \$30.29 \$340.23

Tech Note: 13% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay (Biodynamically farmed on the estate) fermented and aged 11 months in all French oak barrels (30% new) 100% estate. Copper-straw in color with well formed legs; dry, medium-full-bodied with freshly balanced acidity. Big, juicy, wildly flavorful minerally Chardonnay offering a mix of tropical and citrus fruits with well integrated oak and minerally terroir notes. Bear Note: Delicious. Lovely texture and feel. Spec's Score: 95.

**PAUL HOBBS Ulises Valdez Vineyard Chardonnay,
Russian River, 2007**

12x750ml \$71.99 \$810.03

Tech Note: 14.7% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay (Wente and Robert Young clones) fermented with concurrent malo-lactic and aged 16 months in French oak barrels (64% new). Yellow gold in color with well formed legs; dry, medium-full-bodied with balanced acidity, and a really long finish. Rich, classically California Chardonnay with a fine earth-fruit-oak mix. Lots of spice and pineapple and a hint of mushroom. Fine texture and feel. Bear Note: Lovely in the mouth. Sneaky, subtle. YUM. Spec's Score: 94+.

AUTEUR Chardonnay Durell 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, thrilling Chardonnay. Spec's Score: 93+.

KISTLER Chardonnay, Sonoma Mountain, 2009

12x750ml \$60.49 \$680.76

Tech Note: 14.1% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay barrel fermented (using full ML and lees stirring) and aged 11 months in 100% French oak barrels (40% new, all 3 year air-dried oak). Bottled unfiltered and unfiltered. Yellow in color with well formed legs; dry, medium full-bodied with freshly balanced acidity and light phenolics (from the lees and the barrels). Rich, rounded, nutty, earthy. The fruit comes on the palate. Lemony citrus with apple and some tropical notes. Supple but fully present oak. Mushroomy earth with a hint of herbal. Very long finish. The alcohol is present. Bear Note: Complete and delicious. Perfect to serve with great crabcakes. Spec's Score: 92+.



**PINE RIDGE Chardonnay "Dijon Clone", Carneros, Napa Valley,
2008**

6x750ml \$37.89 \$208.06

Tech Note: 14.1% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay (from closely planted - 3.5' x 6' spacing - vineyards with devigorating rootstocks grafted to Dijon clones 76, 95 and 96) barrel fermented using no ML 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. Bear Note: Classic Carneros. Quite delicious. Spec's Score: 92+.

ROBERT CRAIG Chardonnay, Sonoma Valley, 2009

12x750ml Coming Soon

Tech Note: 14.5% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay. 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. Bear Note: Delicious. Pushes the right buttons. Spec's Score: 92+.

**La FOLLETTE Chardonnay Manchester Ridge Vineyard,
Mendocino, 2008**

12x750ml Coming Soon

Tech Note: 14.5% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay barrel fermented and aged sur lies (with early battonage) for 10 months in 100% French Oak (50% new). Gold in color with well formed legs; dry, medium-bodied with balanced acidity and light phenolics. Rich, ripe, old school oak and butter Chardonnay with ripe, integrated tropical, tree and citrus fruit and minerally earth. Bear Note: Maintains it balance. Spec's Score: 92.

ETUDE Chardonnay, Carneros, 2007

12x750ml \$27.39 \$307.44

Tech Note: 14% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay. Fermentation and aging is one-third in small stainless steel vats and two-thirds to French oak barrels (10% new). The wine is allowed to mature undisturbed (no racking or lees stirring) for ten months before bottling. Yellow-straw in color with well formed legs; dry, medium-bodied with freshly balanced acidity and very light phenolics. Juicy, ripe tropical fruit and lots of lime. Classic Carneros Chardonnay that hints at mushroomy earth and subtle oak but it is all about the fruit. Bear Note: Delicious. Spec's Score: 91+.

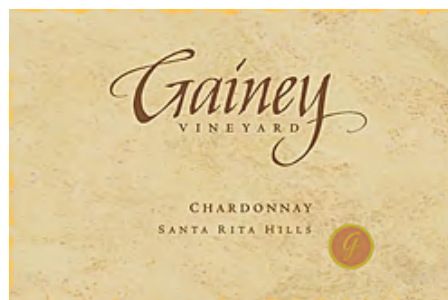
AUTEUR Chardonnay Hyde Vineyard, Carneros, 2008

12x750ml \$45.99 \$519.72

Tech Note: 14.8% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay fermented and aged in all French oak (all seasoned) with no malolactic. Yellow-straw in color with well formed legs; dry, medium full-bodied with balanced acidity. Supple, rich, lots of fruit in the tropical and tree range with some citrus. Integrated and complete. Lots of flavor. Bear Note: Vivid balance. Thrilling. Excellent. Spec's Score: 91+.

GAINEY Chardonnay, Sta. Rita Hills, 2008**12x750ml \$16.89 \$189.59**

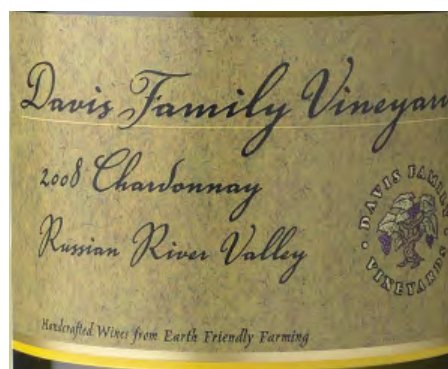
Tech Note: 13.9% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay (65% Evan's Ranch, 15% Huber, 10% Rancho Santa Rosa, and 10% Bien Nacido vineyards). Fermentation: 57% barrel, 43% stainless steel. Aged 9 months in French oak barrels (22% new). Straw in color with well formed legs; dry, medium-bodied with fresh acidity. Clean, refreshing, lively Chardonnay offering well-integrated tropical and citrus fruit with subtle oak and mineral notes. Bear Note: Not at all flashy but fresh and satisfying. Great Value. Spec's Score: 91.

**GORMAN Big Sissy Chardonnay, Columbia Valley, 2009****12x750ml \$33.89 \$380.64**

Tech Note: 14.3% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay fermented and aged 9 months in 100% new French oak barrels with all the bells and whistles (100% ML, wild yeast fermentation, lees stirred). Straw in color with well formed legs; dry, medium-bodied with freshly balanced acidity and very light phenolics. Bright and fresh and more fruit than earth or oak oriented. Citrus and tree fruit are primary. Fine length. Bear Note: Alive in the mouth. Yum. Spec's Score: 91.

**DAVIS FAMILY Chardonnay, Russian River, 2008****12x750ml \$37.65 \$423.97**

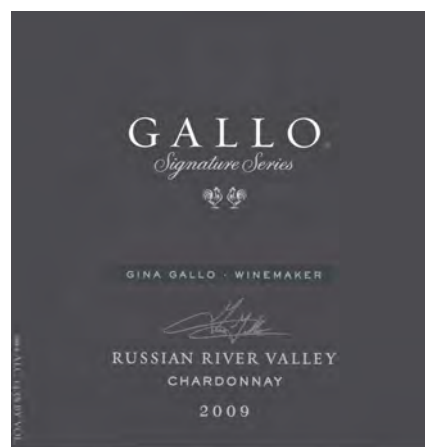
Tech Note: 14.1% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay fermented 30% in tank and 70% oak barrels (33% new) with no malolactic. Yellow straw in color with well formed legs; dry, medium full-bodied with freshly balanced acidity and very light phenolics. Classy, classic, ripe citrus with some tree and tropical fruit accented with some leesy richness and subtle but present oak. Supple, integrated, and delicious. Spec's Score: 91.

**STELTZNER Chardonnay, Oak Knoll District, 2010****12x750ml Coming Soon**

Tech Note: 14.1% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay aged 9 months in mixed French oak. Straw in color, with well formed legs; dry, medium full-bodied with balanced acidity. Unusual spicy pear and citrus Chardonnay with plenty of mineral and a touch of well integrated oak. Bear Note: Not at all the same old thing. Spec's Score: 91.

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 Gallo's 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-minerally earth. Long, rich, and satisfying. Spec's Score: 91.

**LAGUNA Chardonnay, Russian River Valley, 2008****6x750ml \$24.39 \$133.73**

Tech Note: 14.4% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay fermented using full ML and aged sur-lie for 12 months. Gold in color with well formed legs; dry, medium-bodied with freshly balanced acidity and very light phenolics. Rich, spicy, mouth filling solid Chardonnay. Lots of juicy tropical and ripe citrus fruit to go with present oak and mushroomy earth. Spec's Score: 90+. ✱

