

Chardonnay

After years of frustration at its excesses, now is the perfect time to love great California Chardonnay. Its most serious practitioners have taken advantage of a string of cooler vintages to show how this most beloved of grapes in the state can be a vehicle to explore a sense of place.

That focus has created a glorious third wave of Chardonnay — one that gives in to neither the heavy hand of oak or the austerity of stainless steel. All these wines are meditations on what Chardonnay can be when planted in the right spot and interpreted by the right person. That brings its history in California full circle, in a wonderful way.

2010 Calera Mount Harlan Chardonnay (\$30, 14.4% alcohol): The austerity of the vintage shined on Josh Jensen's stark site high above Hollister, planted in 1984 and 1998 to a proprietary selection and fermented, as Calera always is, with indigenous yeasts. While there's an oak signature right away (30% new Francois Freres), its opulent, chewy citrus flavors — like candied citron — are rewarding in every way. There's a tense, long-aging muscle here, and a mastery to the texture that etches big flavors of ripe apple and tangerine.

Porter Pass, the vineyard outside Guerneville owned by his wife Phoebe's family, one of the Sonoma coast's top sites. Stony and powerful, with a dark mineral presence matched by pretty yellow raspberry fruit. A prime expression of site-driven Chardonnay.

2010 Chanin Bien Nacido Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Chardonnay (\$36, 13.91%): Gavin Chanin likes to say he doesn't pick early — he picks on time. Based on his results from a vineyard that has defined California for nearly four decades, he's making a good point. A profound, benchmark expression of Bien Nacido, with ripe aromas of pineapple and Buddha's hand citrus, plus that toasted-oat richness of Chardonnay on its lees, balanced by intense mineral power.

There's a real intimacy with the farming there, and I think it gets better every year. Phoebe is amazing with the plants. She just has a green thumb. So she knows the site really well and over the course of seven years she knows what I'm looking for."

— John Raytek of Ceritas, on working with the vineyard owned by his wife's family

2010 Hanzell Estate Sonoma Valley Chardonnay (\$75, 14.5%): I think of Hanzell at times like Corton-Charlemagne; big, dramatic, grown on soil equally suited to red wine. Its legacy as California's progenitor of barrel-fermented Chardonnay demands respect. The tension-filled 2010 vintage offers savory oak, parsley and lime leaves, with amazing polish to its yellow fruit and an earthy depth.

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