

Tastings | Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher

Inexpensive Chardonnay? No Thanks

For Old U.S. Favorite, The Slump Isn't Over; Six 'Good' Bottles in 70

THE NEW YEAR is a time for new hope, for second chances. In that spirit, we decided to conduct a new tasting of inexpensive American Chardonnay.

Chardonnay continues to be America's sweetheart, far and away the most popular varietal wine in the U.S. It was one of our first loves, too, back in the 1970s, but bad things have happened since then. In broad blind tastings of Chardonnay for this column, we have found far more bad wines than good. In our most recent tasting of Chardonnays under \$20, two years ago, we found only four good ones out of more than 50. Our advice then: Skip the Chardonnay aisle. Considering our own warm feelings toward Chardonnay from our youth, this was painful for us.

Vintages have come and gone since then, however, and we decided—actually, it was Dottie's idea, because she tends to be more generous and forgiving—we'd give inexpensive Chardonnay another chance. We picked up almost 70 that cost less than \$20. We bought wines from the 2004 and 2005 vintages, because those are the ones you are most likely to see on shelves. We focused on the best-known, most widely available names, but we also snagged a few that are a bit more obscure. As always, we were not looking for "America's best Chardonnay," but were trying to get an overall sense of the state of inexpensive Chardonnay at the moment. We certainly understand why people love Chardonnay. When it's right, it has a

very special, easy quality, with a balance of ripe fruit, oak, lemon and other citrus fruits. Good American Chardonnay can fill your mouth with a kind of warm glow that lasts a very long time, leaving your throat coated with a rich, sometimes buttery intensity. To be sure, there is also something special about other Chardonnay-based wines from around the world—the steely intensity of Chablis, the elemental earthiness of other white Burgundies—but a good American Chardonnay is unique and memorable. One of our 15 best wines of 2006 was a Chardonnay, Chasseur from Hunter Wine Cellars (\$55), about which we wrote, "It even looks gutsy: green-tinged and rich. Refined, with toast and great citrusy acidity. Ripe yet restrained." Yummy.

Cheap Tricks

Unfortunately, at some point vintners decided that they could make Chardonnay on the cheap, with flavorings and laboratory tricks replacing real fruit, expensive oak barrels and intense care. Chardonnay became a caricature of itself, with obvious tastes of oak, vanilla, alcohol and sugar replacing anything true. In fact, in our notes during this tasting, we referred to one of our favorites, Clos du Bois "Reserve," as "precaricature Chardonnay," because it tasted of real fruit. It had those comforting and comfortable tastes of nutmeg, vanilla and rich fruit, but they tasted real and balanced. Consider these notes: "Pleasing and plump, with smooth, not-in-your-face oakiness and a bit of vanilla, but relaxed, without too much of anything. Really friendly—round, pleasing wine. Not harsh or alcoholic. Happy wine, with a clean finish and good acidity. Good for a party or as a glass of wine at the bar." Now, really, is that too much to ask for an inexpensive Chardonnay? Apparently

The Dow Jones Under-\$20 Chardonnay Index

VINEYARD/VINTAGE	PRICE	RATING	TASTERS' COMMENTS
Calera Wine Co. 2004 (Central Coast)	\$15.00*	Good/Very Good	Best of tasting. Pleasant, with restrained tastes of good, ripe fruit. Nothing obvious or heavy about it, just good, easy-to-drink Chardonnay fruit. Repeat favorite.
Clos du Bois 'Reserve' 2004 (Russian River Valley, Sonoma County)	\$14.00	Good/Very Good	Best value. Pleasing and plump, with smooth, not-in-your-face oakiness and a bit of vanilla. Relaxed and friendly, without too much alcohol. Repeat favorite.
St. Clement Vineyards 2004 (Carneros, Napa Valley)	\$16.99	Good/Very Good	Happy wine, with good fruit, not too much oak and a flavorful mouthfeel. A hint of minerals at the end gives this a more genuine taste than most.
Bonterra Vineyards 2005 (Mendocino County)	\$11.49	Good	Tastes very real, with good acidity and uncomplicated fruit, with some seashell minerality. Restrained and interesting.
Merryvale Vineyards 'Starmont' 2005 (Napa Valley)	\$17.99	Good	Some character, with balanced tastes and surprising weight. A touch of class. Better with food than most.
Wyatt Wine Cellars 2004 (California)	\$8.49	Good	Pleasant and light, with good balance. Nicely lemony. Good for a large gathering.

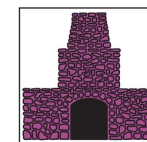
NOTE: Wines are rated on a scale that ranges: Yech, OK, Good, Very Good, Delicious. and Delicious! These are the prices we paid at wine stores in New York. *We paid \$17.99 for Calera, but this price appears to be more representative. Prices vary widely.

so, because our more-common comments in this tasting included "sugar water," "funky, with some potty stuff," "harsh," "sweet," "no hint of real fruit," "fizzy water" and "cotton candy."

If we had to sum up the taste, overall, of inexpensive American Chardonnay today, we'd say the single most notable smell and flavor is pineapple, with syrupy sweetness, some acetate or nail-polish remover, far too much alcohol and a bizarre overlay of unintegrated acidity, as though a big sack of industrial-strength acid mixture had been dumped into the tank at the last minute to compensate for the lack of natural acidity (which gives wines life and makes them food-friendly). If none of that sounds very attractive, well, yep, that's right. In fact of almost 70 wines in our tasting, just six rated Good or better, a terrible outcome. What those six had in common—especially our best of tasting, from Calera—

—should be the simplest thing in the world: tastes of honest Chardonnay fruit. Calera made more than 3,800 cases of that Chardonnay, by the way, and it was distributed in 45 states.

For now, sadly, we would still urge you to avoid the Chardonnay aisle when you are looking for a wine under \$20. There are far better wines for the price all over the wine store, including just about anything these days made from the Sauvignon Blanc grape.



CALERA