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California

Chardonnay for Burgundy lovers

The evolution of Chardonnay in California continues, as cool sites, cool vintages and changes in winemaking styles produce more bottles that will appeal to Burgundy lovers, says Elin McCoy

LAST YEAR AT the West of West Wine Festival, held in the Sonoma town of Sebastopol, I moderated a comparative blind tasting of single-vineyard California Chardonnays and white Burgundies. Before the wine names were revealed, the panel of winemakers, the audience and I voted on the origins of each: was it from the West Sonoma Coast, the Russian River Valley or Burgundy?

What surprised me was the number of California wines that many of us thought were from Burgundy. My takeaway from that result and many other recent tastings is that if you're a white Burgundy fan, there are more Chardonnays that will please your palate than ever before. And what's more – no small detail – they cost a whole lot less.

This amounts to a major stylistic shift in the evolution of Chardonnay in the Golden State. In the 1970s, the Côte d'Or whites set the standard for what Chardonnay could be. My first great experience of California Chardonnay was a wine from Mayacamas Vineyards, whose handsome label with rampant golden mountain lions promised something special. The taste didn't disappoint. Full, rich, smoky and with lemony acidity, the wine distantly echoed Burgundy, but was more rustic, fruity and forthright – a parallel pleasure to France's best, but not quite on that level.

Mayacamas Vineyards was a benchmark bottle for Elin McCoy



In 1976, Chateau Montelena's win against top white Burgundies at The Judgement of Paris tasting kickstarted a Chardonnay boom. However, by the early 1990s the grape's wine taste profile had dramatically changed – I would say deteriorated – as California producers entered a baroque era: almost every bottle seemed sweeter, oakier, fatter, more alcoholic and buttery than the last one.

A backlash against these over-the-top bottlings inspired a flurry of no-oak wines that frequently had no flavour at all. Neither style, frankly, looked to Meursault or Chablis for inspiration.

Neo-Burgundian

Now we have entered a neo-Burgundian era. The West of West tasting set me to thinking about the traits we Burgundy lovers hope for in a California Chardonnay. After all, the villages and vineyards in the grape's home region produce a pretty wide spectrum, from simple basic Bourgogne blancs to lean, flinty Chablis to richer, more opulent grands crus like Corton-Charlemagne.

To Jim Clendenen, winemaker and founder of Au Bon Climat, who learned his craft in Burgundy in the 1970s, 'Burgundy-style' means 'minerality, elegance, texture, complexity, length and ageability'.

I agree, but I'd add to that list the tension of acidity, judicious use of oak ageing, and an alcohol level generally below 14%. ➤



'Burgundy-style means minerality, elegance, texture, complexity, length and ageability'

**Jim Clendenen,
Au Bon Climat**



'Sites with higher elevation have intensity of light, without too much heat, which means more flavour, yet lower alcohol'

Jasmine Hirsch,
Hirsch Vineyards



A handful of winemakers, including Clendenen, Jeffrey Patterson of Mount Eden and Ted Lemon of Littorai (who has made wines in Meursault at Domaine Guy Roulot), have stuck to this traditional model from their beginnings in the 1980s and 1990s, even when it was out of fashion. Now they're basking in its return, though none of them are seeking to copy Burgundy outright.

Others, like Rajat Parr, who makes wines under the Sandhi and Domaine de la Côte labels, are newcomers on a similar mission. For Parr, one key to neo-Burgundian Chardonnay is balance, much touted in the manifesto of In Pursuit of Balance, a group of 30-plus vintners that he co-founded in 2011. Though the group is now disbanding, its shared philosophy of terroir-driven, low-intervention winemaking helped to reshape the wider conversation about what California Chardonnay could be.

Catalysts for change

'The change really started heating up in 2010,' says Parr, 'with a perfect storm of elements that worked together. In Pursuit of Balance was only one of them.' He reminds me that white Burgundy had started shooting up in price with the 2005 vintage; then came the recession, and a shift in people's taste, a new generation of wine drinkers who wanted fresher styles.

California's recent cool vintages have also helped to push Chardonnays in a leaner direction. Both 2010 and 2011 were among the coldest on record for coastal California, and many wines are lean, tight and very distinctive. The 2012s are warmer and richer, while 2013 may be the most classic of all for many wineries, with nervy acidity and backbone.

Another factor was the growing Californian obsession with terroir, as vintners tried to identify the very best regions, microclimates and vineyard sites. Gavin Chanin, a young winemaker whose label is Chanin Wine Company, told me that he thinks of Chardonnay as a terroir grape that shows off a vineyard's personality.

Based on my tastings, these Burgundian-style wines almost always come from the coolest of the cool-climate AVAs, near the coast, where fog and wind and cool air swirl in from the Pacific. So far, there's surprising agreement among winemakers that the top appellations are the West Sonoma Coast, the Santa Cruz mountains, and Santa Rita Hills (Sta Rita Hills on the label) and Santa Maria Valley in Santa Barbara County. I'd also single out a few additional cool spots: Anderson Valley in Mendocino County; the Arroyo Seco AVA in Monterey County; and individual sites like the Hanzell Vineyard in Sonoma, Hyde Vineyard in Carneros and Haynes Vineyard in Coombsville.

'Maritime coolness translates into a long growing season that creates wines with layers of bright but deep flavours, floral aromas, distinct minerality and a kind of succulent juiciness'

Ted Lemon, Littorai Wines (right)

'The marine influence is important in California,' says Parr, 'but it's hard to compare any sites with Burgundy. The latitude is different, for one thing.'

Those areas are the places to home in on if you're a Burgundy lover, but – this being ever-experimental California – within each you can find different styles of Chardonnay. More than in Burgundy, a wine's character depends not just on the individual vineyard, its elevation, the clones and the winemaking, but on the vintner's intention.

West Sonoma Coast

This narrow strip of ridges and small valleys is situated within a few kilometres of the Pacific and has several small sub-regions, such as Freestone, Occidental, Fort Ross-Seaview and Annapolis (the furthest north). It was once thought to be too cold to grow any grapes at all, much less Chardonnay.

Lemon of Littorai, who's been making superb, elegant whites here since 1997, says maritime coolness translates into a long growing season that creates wines with layers of bright but deep flavours, floral aromas, distinct minerality and a kind of succulent juiciness. Often they have surprising power.

Jasmine Hirsch, whose family owns Hirsch Vineyards, explains another factor. 'The sites with higher elevation have intensity of light, without too much heat, which means more flavour yet lower alcohol,' she says.

One of the top new names for great Chardonnay in the area is Ceritas, where John Raytek is co-owner and winemaker. Like many, he believes rocky sites with older vines are more likely to make more complex wines.

Wineries to know: Ceritas, Hirsch Vineyards, Littorai, Peay Vineyards, Red Car Wine.

Santa Cruz Mountains

This mountainous area south of San Francisco, cooled by the Pacific to the west and San Francisco Bay to the east, has always been the



land of iconoclastic winemakers. The thin-soil slopes at high elevations often produce Chardonnays with more intensity, earthiness, complexity and a salty minerality.

Silicon Valley investor Kevin Harvey's love of Burgundy convinced him that one secret to complex Chardonnay is rocky soils at high elevations – and he found those conditions for his Rhys Vineyards project near the San Andreas Fault. Harvey spurns the newer Burgundian Dijon clones and argues that differences in soil, enhanced by organic practices and dry farming, are the most important factors for Burgundian style.

At Mount Eden, old vines dating from the 1940s (of the Mount Eden clone) and planted in shale soil consistently produce very intense, powerful but subtle, ageworthy Chardonnays.

As well as the wineries that are listed below, a number of producers from Sonoma also produce fine Chardonnays from Santa Cruz grapes, including Arnot-Roberts, Kutch Wines and Ceritas.

Wineries to know: Mount Eden Vineyards, Ridge Vineyards, Rhys Vineyards, Thomas Fogarty Winery, Varner Wine.

Santa Barbara County

This region contains a couple of slightly different sub-regions. Closest to the ocean is the very chilly Santa Rita Hills AVA in Santa Ynez Valley, which faces the Pacific unprotected by mountains from morning fog

and afternoon wind. Here the wines have a strong salty character and a high acid signature (according to Parr it's even higher than in Burgundy), as well as a precision, density and structure that's a bit like Chablis – though they don't yet have the laser-sharp, deeply chalky, oyster-shell character of the best wines from Chablis. The most famous vineyard, Sanford & Benedict, can make wine that's more like Meursault, depending on when vintners pick.

The neighbouring Santa Maria Valley is also windswept but not quite as cool.

Wineries to know: Au Bon Climat, Chanin Wine Company, Liquid Farm, Sandhi, Tyler Winery.

Intent and purpose

What always matters most for California winemakers in these regions I've mentioned is what kind of Chardonnay they want to make. Finding the cool, rocky coastal sites that give complexity and ripeness without high alcohol is only one part of it.

Many winemakers swear by heritage grape clones such as the Mount Eden or Wente clone, which was imported from France in 1912 and populated the state's early vineyards. At Hirsch, they see more depth and complexity in Wente vines than in Dijon clones that come from a nursery. Old vines – like those planted in the 1950s at Mount Eden Vineyards in the Santa Cruz Mountains – seem to contribute to depth and complexity.

The most Burgundian style wines seem to come from vintners who are committed traditionalists, fermenting with wild yeasts and using older oak barrels – and often a percentage of new ones – for fermentation and ageing. Clendenen says he uses the same barrels as Eric Rousseau in Burgundy.

One thing white Burgundy lovers prize is the way the wines can develop with age. As California wineries have celebrated their 20th, 30th, 40th, 50th and even 60th anniversaries with vertical tastings over the past couple of years, I've been surprised how well some, like Hanzell, Stony Hill, Mount Eden and Talley, age for 20 years or more.

However, while only some California Chardonnays have the complexity, depth and taste of the earth that shines through in Meursault and Puligny-Montrachet, many of the state's examples do now show plenty of lively acidity, pure lemony fruit and restrained oak. That's reason enough to hope for even more with time. **D**

Award-winning journalist and author Elin McCoy writes for a variety of publications including Bloomberg News ➤



'It's hard to compare any sites with Burgundy. The latitude is different, for one thing'

Rajat Parr, Sandhi

McCoy's best Burgundian-style buys

Mount Eden Vineyard, Estate Chardonnay, Santa Cruz Mountains 2012 96

£46 Roberson

Jeffrey Patterson has been making vivid, intense, ageworthy wines from this vineyard since 1981 and it consistently produces fantastic, Burgundian-style Chardonnays. Barrel-fermented, aged in 50% new French oak, on the lees, the 2012 is striking and very classy, with aromas of lemon oil, deep mineral notes, and an amazingly long finish. Domaine Eden Chardonnay, the second wine, is a true bargain. **Drink** 2016-2026 **Alc** 13.5%



Littorai, BA Thieriot Vineyard Chardonnay, Sonoma Coast 2013 94

£44-£67 AG Wines, Hedonism

Ted Lemon, who spent time as a winemaker in Burgundy, founded Littorai in 1993, and has made Chardonnay from this biodynamic, dry-farmed vineyard near Occidental since 1997. It's my favourite among his four single-vineyard bottlings. Intense yet delicate, 2013 is all about length and structure, with a characteristic tension of minerality in the finish and very pure, exotic flavours of fruit and chamomile. **Drink** 2016-2027 **Alc** 13.1%

Rhys Vineyards, Alpine Vineyard Chardonnay, Santa Cruz Mountains 2012 93

£118 Handpicked Burgundy, Hedonism

All four Chardonnays made at owner Kevin Harvey's spare-no-expense winery are terrific. This one comes from a steep, chalky vineyard at 365m to 454m elevation, only 16km from the Pacific. I love its bright, racy, super-pure flavours, its coiled power, precision and focus, and its crushed rock complexity. Deep and full-bodied, it has the lean elegance and long finish of a top Meursault. **Drink** 2017-2030 **Alc** 13.3%

Sandhi, Bentrock Chardonnay, Sta Rita Hills 2013 93

£65-£80 Harvey Nichols, Roberson

Rajat Parr and winemaker Sashi Moorman are behind this refreshing wine with bright acidity, seamless oak

and a nose of toasted coconut. Round and classy, it has great flavour intensity considering its modest alcohol level, and it compares well with a Meursault. The six-year-old Bentrock vineyard is on the southwestern edge of cool Sta Rita Hills. **Drink** 2016-2021 **Alc** 12%



Chanin Wine Company, Bien Nacido Vineyard Chardonnay, Santa Maria Valley 2013 92

£26.67 BI Wines, Stannary St

Wine Co

Gavin Chanin, one of the state's hot young winemakers, worked at Au Bon Climat and founded his own brand in Santa Barbara County in 2007 when he was only 21. He makes Pinot Noir but his gift is for Chardonnay – like this one from the oldest block in a famous vineyard. It's rich and textured, yet refined and layered, with complex notes of citrus, hazelnuts and minerals. **Drink** 2016-2021 **Alc** 13%

Hirsch Vineyards, Estate Chardonnay, Sonoma Coast 2013 92

£60 Roberson

David Hirsch was one of the first to pioneer the far Sonoma Coast, planting on a ridge with a view of the Pacific. He sold grapes to winemakers like Ted Lemon (left), and later started making his own wines. Mostly known for Pinot, Hirsch makes a powerful yet nuanced Chardonnay with aromas of mint, a taste of minerals and lemon, and a luscious texture. **Drink** 2016-2023 **Alc** 14%

Ridge Vineyards, Monte Bello Chardonnay, Santa Cruz Mountains 2012 92

£45-£78 James Nicholson, Lay & Wheeler, Harvey Nichols, Hedonism, Highbury Vintners, Jeroboams, Woodwinters, Z&B Vintners

This iconic winery, best known for Cabernet and Zinfandel, produced its first Chardonnay in 1962. This rich, complex wine comes from a few special parcels of vines planted on limestone. It resembles grand cru Burgundy, with mineral intensity and a rich texture, but lots of finesse. Unlike most in California, it's aged in American oak barrels, not French. **Drink** 2016-2028 **Alc** 14.3%

Au Bon Climat, Sanford & Benedict Chardonnay, Sta Rita Hills 2013 91

£25.83-£29 AG Wines, Highbury Vintners, WoodWinters

Jim Clendenen makes around 10 different Chardonnays; among the best are those from his Historic Vineyards Collection. I'm always torn between his Los Alamos bottling and this, from one of California's great vineyards planted in the 1970s. The wine is a seamless blend of power and elegance with floral aromas and a taste of hazelnuts and minerals. **Drink** 2016-2022 **Alc** 14%

Ceritas, Porter-Bass Vineyard, Sonoma Coast 2013 91

£90 Theatre of Wine

John Raytek makes five Chardonnays under his Ceritas label (the name means 'mineral expression of the soil' in Spanish) from vineyards on the Sonoma Coast and the Santa Cruz Mountains. This one, from biodynamic vines in the Sonoma Coast's Green Valley, is lemony and stony, with white flower aromas, subtle layers of flavour, and a long, flinty finish. **Drink** 2016-2022 **Alc** 13.1%



Thomas Fogarty, Portola Springs Estate Chardonnay, Santa Cruz Mountains 2012 91

N/A UK www.fogartywinery.com

Founded by Dr Fogarty in 1978 and now run by his son, this winery is a 10-minute drive from Rhys (left). There are four single-vineyard Chardonnays; this one, from a steep, tiny plot with volcanic soil, is the most mineral, with vibrant pear and apple tones, plus a complex, earthy finish. **Drink** 2016-2023 **Alc** 12.5%

Hanzell, Estate Chardonnay, Sonoma Valley 2010 90

POA Armit Wines

Burgundy-loving James Zellerbach, who founded the winery in the 1950s, was the first to purchase French oak barrels. The wine is a Californian classic: full, spicy, rich and creamy-textured, with fresh, luscious acidity, hazelnut notes and a thread of minerality. It ages brilliantly. **Drink** 2016-2025 **Alc** 14.5%

For full details of UK stockists, see p50

Vintage report

Californian Cabernet 2013

Widely hailed as a great vintage for Cabernet Sauvignon, 2013 was nonetheless a high-wire act. William Kelley assesses the wines' quality and longevity

FOR MANY WINEMAKERS and vintners, California's 2013 Cabernet Sauvignon vintage is quite simply the finest of their careers. 'I can now die happy as a winemaker,' says Tod Mostero of Dominus Estate. 'I'd love to see another year as good as this, but I can settle for just one.' Up and down the state, the refrain is the same. Even veteran winemaker Ric Forman, who is celebrating his 40th vintage in Napa Valley this year, contentedly acknowledges that 2013 ranks as 'one of the good ones!'

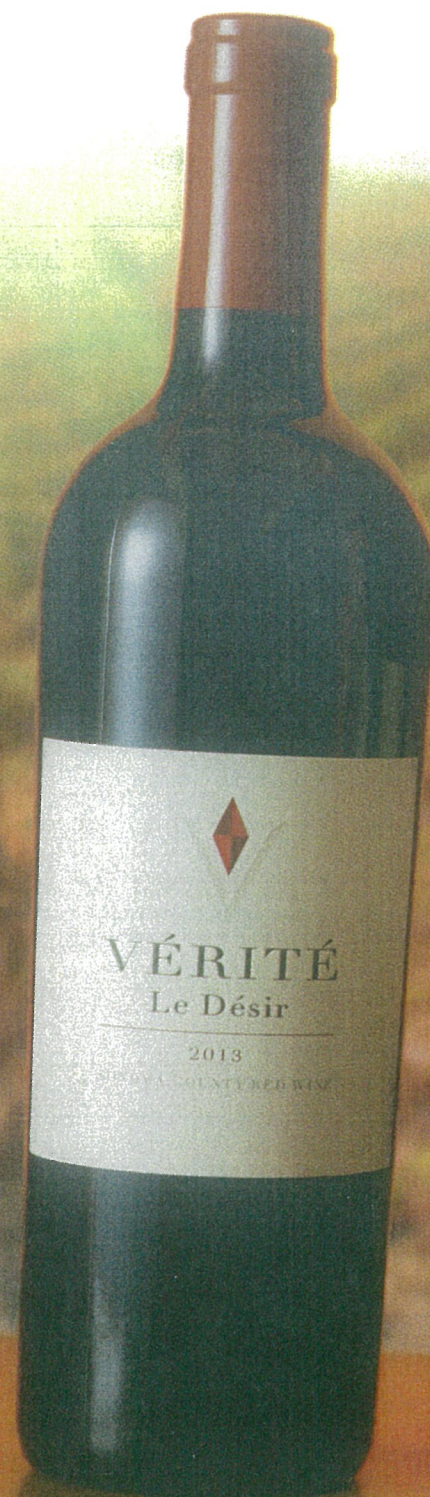
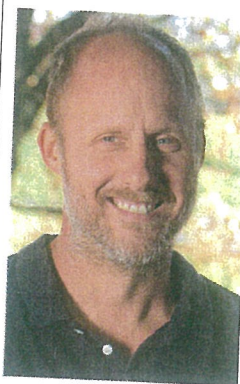
Across California, vines suffering through a second consecutive year of drought produced unusually small berries, with a high solids-to-juice ratio. A consistently warm summer and early autumn, uninterrupted by heat spikes or rain, led to an early harvest in ideal conditions.

'The raw material in 2013 was the best we've ever seen,' reflects Thomas Brown, one of Napa Valley's most celebrated consultants and winemaker for Schrader Cellars and Maybach Family Vineyards. His assessment is echoed by growers and winemakers in other appellations including the Santa Cruz Mountains and Sonoma County.

The result? Wines of extraordinary depth and tannic concentration, built for the ages. As Eric Baugher of Ridge Vineyards reveals, 2013 is 'undoubtedly the most tannic vintage of the new millennium', but its structure is complemented by a remarkable wealth of fruit – so much so that Ridge forewent its ➤

'The raw material in 2013 was the best we've ever seen'

Thomas Brown,
winemaker



Kelley's top 2013 Californian Cabernets

Dunn Vineyards, Cabernet Sauvignon, Howell Mountain, Napa Valley 2013 97

£110 **The Winery**

Aromas of blackcurrant, blackberry, rich earth, spice and liquorice are followed by a palate of striking persistence and structural amplitude. In 2013 this is typically large-scaled, fresh and built for the long haul, but Mike Dunn's thoughtful changes to the estate's barrel programme have resulted in more refined tannins. Brettanomyces issues that plagued the Dunn wines about 15 years ago also seem long gone, so nothing should compromise their lovely evolution in the cellar. **Drink** 2023-2070 **Alcohol** 13.9%



Harlan Estate, Oakville, Napa Valley 2013 97

POA **Harrods, Thorman**

Hunt, Woodwinters

Alluring aromas of juicy mulberry, black raspberry, graphite,

dried herbs and rich cigar tobacco introduce a large-scaled wine framed by an ample and refined tannic chassis. Once again, Harlan's perfectionist team has composed a compelling portrait of its hillside estate in Oakville. **Drink** 2023-2055 **Alc** 14.5%

Spottswoode, Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, St Helena, Napa Valley 2013 97

POA **Domaine Direct**

Nuances of clove, tar and graphite marry with aromas of crunchy dark fruit, introducing a firmly structured and intensely concentrated wine that displays striking cut and energy. This is one of the best young Spottswoodes of recent times, and one of the most vibrant, primary benchland Cabernet Sauvignons of the vintage – it's also likely to be one of the most long-lived. **Drink** 2023-2055 **Alc** 13.9%

Cain, Five, Spring Mountain, Napa Valley 2013 96

POA **Justerini & Brooks**

A fragrant but savoury bouquet of perfumed blackberry, rich earth, fennel seed and cigar tobacco leads to a wine with lovely cut, vibrancy and concentration, structured around firm but refined 2013 tannins. Christopher Howell deserves more recognition for the amazing consistency, longevity and sophistication that his wines from this striking Spring Mountain site routinely achieve, as anyone with Cain bottlings in their cellar from the 1980s and 1990s can attest. **Drink** 2023-2065 **Alc** 13.9% ➤





Above: harvesting at Ridge's Monte Bello Estate in the Santa Cruz Mountains

customary egg-white fining, a practice that can refine aggressive tannins but which was deemed unnecessary in 2013.

Unlike the rather facile and fruit-forward 2012 vintage, the 2013s possess, as Mostero puts it, 'another dimension' that makes them 'unique'. Indeed, comparisons with other vintages seem otiose. 'The vintage amplified everything,' Brown explains, 'giving us elevated levels of acidity and tannin that cut through the fruit, preserving balance.' The hallmark of 2013 is thus a marriage of ripe fruit with the savoury qualities that modern California Cabernet Sauvignon so frequently lacks. That makes for striking complexity and sophistication in the glass.

Perils of excess

Even a vintage as propitious as 2013, however, can present challenges. For one, Cabernet reached optimum maturity hard on the heels of earlier-ripening varieties across California. Many winemakers accordingly struggled to process so much fruit in so short a time. 'Never before,' Baugher told me in October 2013, 'have I had to ferment so much Cabernet Sauvignon at the same time as Zinfandel, Syrah, Carignan and Chardonnay.' Nick Gislason at Screaming Eagle remembers 2013 as a vintage where he was thankful to preside over such an over-resourced winery. But not all wineries were equipped to face these logistical pressures, so some were forced to harvest later than they might have wished.

The vintage's balmy conditions also offered almost unparalleled opportunities for intentional excess: winemakers could wait to harvest as long as they liked, exploring the

'A warm summer and early autumn led to an early harvest in ideal conditions'

Corison, Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley 2013 96

£75 Roberson

Beautifully perfumed aromas of rose petal, violets, blackberry, dark chocolate and incipient cigar tobacco burst from the glass in a striking array, the prelude to a wine that's structured around refined, savoury tannins and juicy acidity. An ethereal and classically proportioned Cabernet which will age effortlessly thanks to its flawless balance, likely putting on weight with bottle age. Terrific stuff; not to be missed.

Drink 2023-2064 **Alc** 13.5%



Diamond Creek, Gravelly Meadow, Napa Valley 2013 96

£132 Armit Wines,

Turville Valley Wines

Notes of cassis, rich earth and pencil shavings lead into a

seamless, elegant but authoritative wine that nods to the Médoc. This is the most refined of the Diamond Creek bottlings, hailing, as its name suggests, from dry-farmed vines growing in deep gravel soils. **Drink** 2020-2050 **Alc** 14.5%

Vérité, Le Désir, Sonoma County 2013 96

£350 (2012) Fells

The most exotic and aromatically seductive of the Verité wines, wild red and black fruits marry with nuances of cigar tobacco and floral details. While similarly large-scaled, Le Désir's tannic structure is more supple than that of its siblings and its palate presence appealingly energetic. A blend of 62% Cabernet Franc, 22% Merlot, 11% Cabernet Sauvignon and the balance Malbec.

Drink 2020-2045 **Alc** 14.2%

Mount Eden Vineyards, Cabernet Sauvignon, Santa Cruz Mountains 2013 95

POA Roberson

A true classic, bursting with red and black fruit, vine smoke and pencil shavings; structured by fine tannins and bracing Santa Cruz acidity. Consistently one of the most ageworthy Cabernets in California, gaining in volume and expansiveness with time in the cellar, always vibrant and intense. **Drink** 2023-2060 **Alc** 13.5%

Vérité, La Joie, Sonoma County 2013 95

£350 (2012) Fells

The most brooding and massive wine in the Verité portfolio. Creamy cassis, plum and graphite are followed by a large-scaled, dense, intensely concentrated and savoury wine which lives up to its reputation as Sonoma's answer to Pauillac. A blend of 71% Cabernet Sauvignon, 16% Merlot, 8% Cabernet Franc and 5% Petit Verdot. **Drink** 2023-2055 **Alc** 14.2%

Opus One, Oakville, Napa Valley 2013 94

POA Berry Bros & Rudd, BI Wines, Fine & Rare, Harrods, Hedonism, Private Cellar, Woodwinters

Red and black fruit, graphite, incense and cedar meld together in a youthfully reserved bouquet that should blossom in bottle. On the palate, the 2013 is more seriously structured than its polished 2012 sibling, framed by savoury structuring tannins that are built for the cellar. The latest in a string of recent successes. **Drink** 2019-2035 **Alc** 14.5%

Ramey, Pedregal Vineyard Cabernet

Sauvignon, Oakville, Napa Valley 2013 94

POA WoodWinters

The most exciting of Ramey's crop of 2013s, the Pedregal reveals a classic Oakville nose, with aromas of plush red and black fruits, liquorice and rich earth. These are the prelude to a modern but quite restrained style of Cabernet Sauvignon, that benefits from good acidity and refined tannins. **Drink** 2018-2030 **Alc** 14.5%

Inglénook, Rubicon, Rutherford, Napa Valley 2013 93

£178 BI Wines, Harrods, Hedonism

Juicy red fruit, spice and rich soil preface a savoury, fresh and elegantly medium-bodied wine that's cut from classical cloth. There is a lot to admire in the wine's balance and cut, but like its more modest sibling one wonders if the disposition of the site might be to produce something deeper and more intense? This is surely indicative of changes for the better at Inglénook, however. **Drink** 2018-2038 **Alc** 13.8%



O'Shaughnessy, Cabernet Sauvignon, Mount Vedeer, Napa Valley 2013 93

POA Harrods

Wild and briary aromas of blackberry, blackcurrant leaf,

herbs and coniferous forest floor are replete with Mount Vedeer typicity. This attractive nose introduces a juicy, dense and richly textural Cabernet, that's ripe but still full of character.

Drink 2016-2025 **Alc** 15.1%

Cakebread Cellars, Dancing Bear Ranch, Howell Mountain, Napa Valley 2013 92

POA Harrods

Notes of black raspberry, blackcurrant, roasted coffee and exotic spices meld in a heady, aromatic array on the nose. They are followed on the palate by a voluptuous and supple wine underpinned by the typical vigour of mountain tannins, and showing a bit more cut and vibrancy than Cakebread's other 2013 wines.

Drink 2018-2025 **Alc** 15.1% >

extremes of ripeness in an attempt to tame the year's intimidating tannins. After talk in the press about a movement to 'rein in ripeness' – an idea inculcated by the limitations which the cool 2010 and 2011 vintages imposed on growers and winemakers – 2012 and now 2013 are a resounding corrective; proof that the demise of high-octane Cabernet has been much exaggerated.

For now, the savoury complexity that distinguishes the 2013 vintage occludes many of the signatures of over-ripeness, but a surprising number of seemingly successful wines began to reveal a pruned, raisined – even oxidative – character when they were retasted 36 hours after opening. This bodes ill for their evolution in bottle, and it is clear that the year's extraordinary potential to create ageworthy wines which will gain nuance in the cellar was not universally realised.

Tannin talk

Another potential pitfall lay in the vintage's tannic concentration itself, a quality which required careful management in the winery: over-extraction was a very real danger, and – as with ripening – the real challenge in 2013 was knowing when to stop. 'It would be easy to have taken things too far in 2013,' reflects Mike Dunn, whose vineyards high on Howell Mountain produce firm, amply structured wines, even in lighter-styled vintages.

Still more importantly, the disposition of the vintage to produce deep, tannic and savoury wines was fundamentally at odds with many producers' desire to craft supple, immediately appealing wines of almost >



'2013 is undoubtedly the most tannic vintage of the new millennium'

Eric Baugher, Ridge Vineyards



Above: the Cabernet vineyards at Dancing Bear Ranch, owned by Cakebread Cellars, are planted on the slopes of Howell Mountain in Napa Valley