

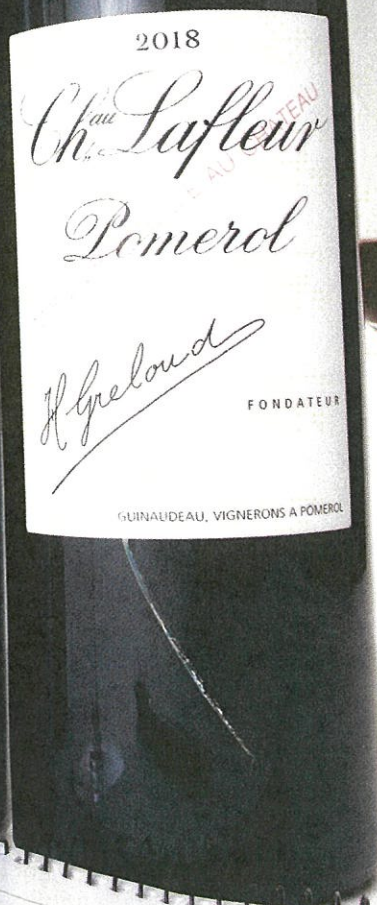
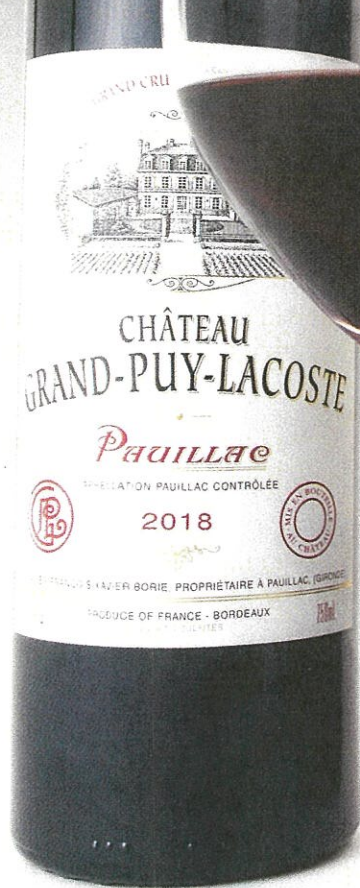
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**TOP CALIFORNIAN
CHARDONNAY**

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Premium Californian Chardonnay

From pioneer plantings, through the heyday of big toasty styles to leaner cool-climate bottles, Californian Chardonnay now offers wine lovers real diversity, says Stephen Brook

Californian Chardonnay has evolved over the decades just as other varieties have done in this US state drenched in sunshine. In 1970 there were just over 1,000ha planted. Clones were derived from plantings made by Chardonnay pioneers such as Wente and Stony Hill. Until the 1980s most Chardonnays did not go through malolactic fermentation, and the style could be angular, although other wines were given a full-on oaky upbringing. A few wineries, such as Mayacamas and Chateau Montelena, still eschew malo. While consumers loved the big oaky styles, winemakers were ill at ease. Doug Meador in Monterey once told me: 'Only a termite could love California Chardonnay.'

It was Kendall-Jackson that created the first wildly successful Chardonnay brand: Vintner's Reserve. That was a misnomer, since the wine was a multi-region blend (to give consistency from year to year) and it was born after a stuck fermentation delivered a wine with about 9g of residual sugar. It was a hit. By 1989, 400,000 cases were produced, and that figure soon rose above 1,000,000. A slight sweetness remained the hallmark of the brand.

Contrasting styles

Inevitably there was eventually a reaction against the style. Big toasty Chardonnays with fairly high alcohol tended to taste the same, whatever their regional origin. Efforts were certainly made by wineries in the 1980s to plant Chardonnay in cooler areas such as Carneros, but the style remained hefty. In the 2000s, however, a new generation, personified by the likes of sommelier Rajat Parr and Santa



'In the 2000s a new generation strove to create a different, more subtle style'

Barbara winemaker Sashi Moorman, strove to create a different style that was more subtle and more food-friendly. Young winemakers such as Gavin Chanin refused to chaptalise, abandoned lees-stirring, and kept alcohol levels well below the 14% popular at the time. This was not exactly a revolution, as winemakers such as Jim Clendenen and Ted Lemon had espoused a leaner style for decades.

The Santa Rita Hills was identified as cool enough to produce this style, as were parts of Anderson Valley in Mendocino and sectors of the Sonoma Coast AVA that were close to the Pacific's chilly breezes. To unify this trend, an organisation called In Pursuit of Balance was launched. Viticulture was adapted to bring

the fruit to full ripeness at lower sugar levels – which was easier to do in the cool coastal sites rapidly being developed.

Today In Pursuit of Balance no longer exists, but its programme is still accepted by many wineries. Its appeal will be primarily to European-style palates, but some question whether this reined-in style is appropriate for the Californian climate, as it only delivers in the very coolest sites, which are by definition marginal. Many continue to enjoy the bigger styles of Chardonnay, but at least horizons have been expanded and consumers can decide on the kind of Chardonnay they prefer. Californian Chardonnay has never been more diverse, and that has to be a positive development.

CALIFORNIAN CHARDONNAY: THE FACTS

Total plantings in California (2017) 38,820ha
 Monterey 6,867ha; Sonoma 6,320ha; Napa 2,798ha;
 Santa Barbara 2,290ha;
 Mendocino 1,876ha
 Source: California Wine Institute

CALIFORNIA: KNOW YOUR VINTAGES

2018 Steady ripening through a mild summer, especially in Sonoma, gave a fine crop of excellent whites.

2017 A complicated year with a cool spell in August, then record-breaking heat in early September, but most whites had been picked by then.

2016 A cool summer without heat spikes proved excellent for white wines.

2015 The summer was hot and dry, but there was helpful rainfall before harvest, which was extremely early. Chardonnay of good quality, picked by late August.

2014 Cooler than average though with heat spikes in early summer. Excellent quality in Napa and Sonoma.

2013 A normal growing season with good yields and high ripeness.

Stephen Brook has been a *Decanter* contributing editor since 1996 ➤

The verdict

This wide-ranging tasting showed the breadth of Californian Chardonnay styles, which reflects the differing palates of local and international drinkers, notes Stephen Brook

Judges declared themselves perplexed but not surprised by this tasting. Perplexed because it was difficult to come to an overall conclusion – but they had already expected to have this reaction. Californian Chardonnay has become extremely diverse in its terroir expression and its winemaking. In the past it was caricatured as buttery and heavy, an opulent crowd-pleaser. Such styles still exist, and were present in the tasting, but they have to sit alongside many other expressions.

Is such diversity positive or confusing for drinkers? Alex Hunt MW had no doubts: 'Variability and diversity are to be welcomed, if only as a myth-buster. There has never been a single style of Californian Chardonnay. There's a range of alcohol levels, different uses of oak, varying acidity levels. It's a good thing that their Chardonnay isn't a one-trick pony, and that was confirmed by this tasting.' Chardonnay, he added, is 'a kind of special case, being the one noble variety that's actually a neutral grape – but the positive side of this is that it's expressive of place, as well as suited to winemaking interpretation'.

Tim Jackson MW agreed. 'We could definitely discern a sense of place. To take one example, the wines from Santa Cruz Mountains – though we only tasted a few – were all marked

by high acidity. In contrast, there's still a place for old-school wines, and there were quite a few in the tasting. I too applaud the diversity, although I often had the sense that while the range of wines was representative of California's different styles, we weren't necessarily seeing the very best examples.'

Hunt found that his expectations weren't always met. 'I expected the wines from warm Napa Valley to be heavyweights, but that wasn't necessarily the case – perhaps because many came from the Napa side of Carneros,' he noted. Jackson had been hoping for more high spots from Santa Rita Hills, but was rather disappointed, though there were good wines.

All of us expected more wines in the style championed by the now-disbanded In Pursuit of Balance (IPOB) movement: fully ripe wines at moderate alcohols and with fine acidity and even raciness. Hunt said: 'Perhaps some of the boutique wineries that adopt the IPOB philosophy didn't submit their wines because volumes are low. And although the movement has won much praise, there is room for some scepticism. Such wines can be ascetic and skinny, and that's not necessarily appropriate for sunny California.'

'There's still room for the big oak styles, as long as they resound with

'There has never been a single style of Californian Chardonnay'

energy and don't fall flat,' Hunt continued. 'The IPOB approach requires high-wire winemaking, which is difficult to achieve.'

Certain wines won no plaudits: the low-acidity, high-alcohol wines that were overpowering and lacked finesse. Jackson observed: 'We shouldn't underestimate the strength of the domestic market. Many American drinkers like that style and wineries are happy to produce them. But they're not necessarily going to win over European palates.'

About 20 years ago *Decanter* organised a simultaneous blind-tasting in London and New York of a dozen Californian Chardonnays. The wine that found the least favour in London – a strapping Carneros Chardonnay with high alcohol – came top in the American ranking. I'm not sure much has changed, despite the best effort of the IPOB crusaders.

THE SCORES

54 wines tasted
Exceptional 0
Outstanding 0
Highly Recommended 14
Recommended 26
Commended 13
Fair 1
Poor 0
Faulty 0

Entry criteria: producers and UK agents were invited to submit latest-release Chardonnays priced from £40 or \$50, with availability in the UK and/or US

THE JUDGES

Stephen Brook



Brook has been a contributing editor to *Decanter* since 1996 and has won a clutch of awards for his writing on wine. The author of almost 40 books, his works include *The Wines of*

California, which won three awards. Brook also fully revised the last two editions of Hugh Johnson's *Wine Companion*.

Alex Hunt MW



Hunt joined the wine trade as a van driver for Oddbins while studying at Oxford. In 2000, he joined Mayfair Cellars, before moving to Berkman Wine Cellars in 2006, where he is currently purchasing director. He became a Master of Wine in 2010, having submitted a dissertation on ripeness trends in California.

Tim Jackson MW



After falling in love with wine in Chablis in 1994, Jackson became a Master of Wine in 2017. He writes about wine for his website, winebook.co.uk, in addition to hosting corporate wine

tastings. Jackson is passionate about teaching consumers about wine, and this was the subject of his MW research paper.

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED 90-94pts

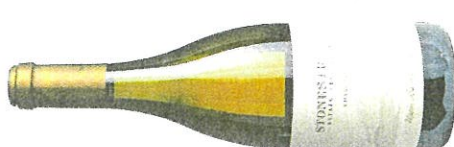


Ridge Vineyards, Monte Bello, Santa Cruz Mountains 2016

Decanter average score: 92/100pts
Individual judges' scores: Stephen Brook 93
Alex Hunt MW 92 Tim Jackson MW 91

£105 Berry Bros & Rudd

Sweet, buttery, apple pie nose, plus apricot and quince. Sleek attack, fresh and poised, taut, with good fruit concentration and an appealing silkiness. There's some tangy acidity on the finish that cleanses the palate. **Drink** 2020-2025 **Alcohol** 14.5%

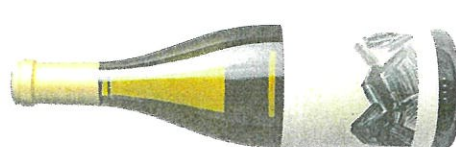


Stonestreet Estate Vineyards, Upper Barn Vineyard, Alexander Valley, Sonoma County 2015

92 SB 91 AH 94 TJ 91

£87.99-£90.99 D Byrne & Co, Highbury Vintners, Nickolls & Perks, WoodWinters

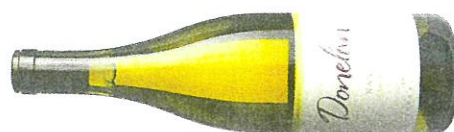
Lush and smoky stone-fruits nose with a sense of underlying power. Density and grip on the palate with impressive weight of fruit. Caramel notes come through on the persistent finish. **Drink** 2019-2022 **Alc** 14%



Chanin, Sandford & Benedict, Santa Rita Hills, Santa Barbara County 2016 91 SB 91 AH 90 TJ 92

£50 Stannary St Wine Co

Nicely integrated mealy, patissiere oak, with fresh, ripe lemon and white peach fruit. Lush and juicy, this shows ample fruit, weight and sufficient acidity to give some drive and pungency. **Drink** 2020-2025 **Alc** 13.5%

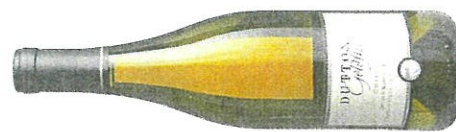


Donelan, Nancie, Sonoma County 2015 91 SB 89 AH 91 TJ 92

£42 Vineyard Cellars

Ripe apple notes here, along with hazelnut and a whiff of flint, plus some creamy richness. Expansive but bright on the palate, with ripe lemon briskness bringing balance. **Drink** 2019-2023 **Alc** 14%

‘There’s still room for the big styles, if they resound with energy’



Dutton-Goldfield, Green Valley of Russian River Valley, Sonoma County 2014 90 SB 85 AH 92 TJ 92

N/A UK www.duttongoldfield.com

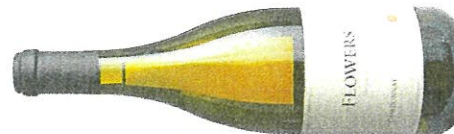
Intensity of ripe lemon and lemon thyme aromatics amidst a subtle layer of mint, toasted almond and cinnamon tones. Showing layers of stony mineral, cream, almond and hazelnut toast, with ripe white peach fruit. **Drink** 2019-2023 **Alc** 13.5%



Far Niente, Napa Valley 2017 90 SB 90 AH 93 TJ 88

£76 Great Wines Direct, Hallgarten Wines, Nickolls & Perks, Strictly Wine

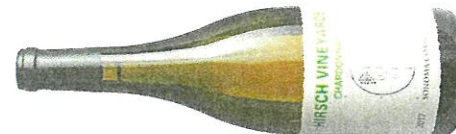
Sweet, buttery stone fruits on the nose along with apricot jam and lime. Plenty of acidity, well allied to fruit, with oak in the background. This is rather grown-up and well-tuned. **Drink** 2019-2022 **Alc** 14.5%



Flowers, Sonoma County 2016 90 SB 87 AH 92 TJ 91

£59 The Wine Treasury

With a saline-maritime character on the nose, this feels decidedly cool-climate in style. The palate is lithe and bright, polished but tense, with mandarin touches to the stone fruit core. **Drink** 2019-2023 **Alc** 13.5%



Hirsch Vineyards, Sonoma Coast 2017 90 SB 91 AH 88 TJ 91

N/A UK www.hirschvineyards.com

Taut and powerful, lemony-toasty aromas – this is still very youthful on the nose. Fresh attack, limpid and lively. The palate has precision and cut with a cocktail of stone fruits and citrus. **Drink** 2020-2025 **Alc** 13% ➤

Decanter
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Thursday 20th June 2019

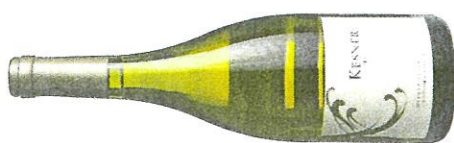
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HIGHLY RECOMMENDED (Continued) 90-94pts



Kesner, Heintz Vineyard, Sonoma Coast 2014 90 SB 89 AH 89 TJ 93

£59 Stannary St Wine Co

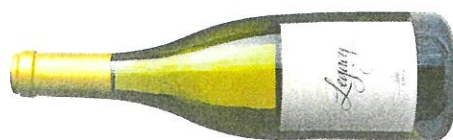
Apple pie and honey on the nose. A fine line of acidity runs right through the rich palate of peach and passion fruit, subtle cinnamon spiced oak and the creaminess of the long finish. Drink 2019-2023 Alc 14%



Kutch, Trout Gulch Vineyard, Santa Cruz Mountains 2017
90 SB 88 AH 92 TJ 91

£50 Roberson

Baking spice notes with mango fruit in the background. Lively acidity provides lift to the lemon and subtle cinnamon spice notes, as well as bringing freshness and tang. Drink 2020-2025 Alc 12.5%



Legacy, Alexander Valley, Sonoma County 2016
90 SB 88 AH 90 TJ 91

N/A UK www.legacywines.com/

A broad, warm-climate style with buttered popcorn, ripe lemon, apricot crème brûlée and some hazelnut complexity. Silky textured, full-bodied and creamy, yet with a fine sense of detail and poise. Drink 2019-2023 Alc 14%



Morgan, Morgan Double L Vineyard, Santa Lucia Highlands, Monterey County 2015
90 SB 92 AH 88 TJ 90

£50 Bibendum

Broad nose of rich, creamy, ripe pineapple and passionfruit. Flinty, lean, crisp palate that belies the richness of the nose. Finishes creamy and long. Drink 2019-2024 Alc 14.5%



Mount Eden Vineyards, Santa Cruz Mountains 2015
90 SB 90 AH 88 TJ 92

POA Roberson

Toasted hazelnuts and lemon sherbet, with some preserved lemon character. Rich and suave but there's a taut quality here too – it favours tension over opulence and overt fruitiness. Drink 2020-2024 Alc 14%



Tyler, Sanford & Benedict Vineyard, Santa Rita Hills, Santa Barbara County 2016
90 SB 88 AH 91 TJ 90

£49.95 JN wine

Cool, fresh white peach and lemon fruit, with baking spice overtones. Lean and chalky palate with crisp acidity; an ultra-modern style. Drink 2020-2024 Alc 13%

RECOMMENDED 86-89pts

Wine	Score	SB	AH	TJ	Tasting note	Alc	Drink	Price	Stockists
Au Bon Climat, 35 Anniversary, Santa Maria Valley 2015	89	87	90	91	Ripe and lightly honeyed nose, apple, apricot along with crushed rock and baking spice. Very refreshing on the taut, sappy palate.	13.5%	2019-2023	POA	Fieds Morris & Verdin
Donkey & Goat, Perli Vineyards, Mendocino Ridge 2016	89	90	87	89	Distinctly toasty nose with apple and apricot fruit. Zesty and precise, trim and lively, with freshness of acidity giving lift to this otherwise rich style.	14%	2019-2023	£47	Nekter
Hanzell Vineyards, Sonoma Valley, Sonoma County 2015	89	88	87	91	Almond and hazelnut touches to ripe white peach fruit. Creamy mid-palate texture with fresh lemon acidity taking the fruit quite far through the finish.	14%	2019-2023	POA	The Wine Society
Joseph Phelps, Freestone Vineyards, Sonoma Coast 2016	89	89	87	92	Forthright on the nose with very ripe juicy apple and apricot notes. Pithy bitterness on the palate gives a counterpoint to dense fruit and spice.	14%	2019-2024	£55	Private Cellar
Merryvale, Silhouette, Napa Valley 2016	89	92	86	88	Lush stone-fruit nose with oak in evidence, adding nuance and complexity. A voluptuous style, broad and succulent, but also concentrated and textured.	14.5%	2019-2023	N/A UK	www.merryvale.com
Patz & Hall, Dutton Ranch, Russian River Valley 2016	89	90	88	90	Rich and warming nose of baking spice, vanilla, toasted hazelnuts and stone fruit. Plenty of fruit and acidity to balance the creamy oak on the palate.	14.5%	2019-2023	£54	The Wine Treasury
Paul Hobbs, Russian River Valley, Sonoma County 2016	89	89	90	89	Minty lift to the ripe lemon rind fruit, almond and baking spice oak aromas. Full without being heavy on the palate, with a welcome lively acidity.	15%	2019-2022	£49.99	Beckford Bottle Shop, Carruthers & Kent
Cakebread Cellars, Reserve, Los Carneros, Napa Valley 2016	88	90	85	89	Zesty ripe citrus nose, with discreet oakiness. Fresh attack, sleek, polished and concentrated with surprising leanness of lemon fruit.	14%	2019-2023	POA	Corney & Barrow
Calera, Mount Harlan, San Benito County 2016	88	90	88	87	Opulent tropical banana and mango nose. Rich, textured and swaggering, this has concentration and intensity, with decent acidity and a long, linear finish.	14.5%	2019-2023	£60	Top Selection