BOTTLE SERVICE

WHAT TO DRINK NEXT

Chardonnay’s New Turn From golden apple and spice to flint-on-steel flavors, there’s more to these California whites than you might imagine. By Ray Isle
CALIFORNIA CHARDONNAY is at a strange crossroads right now. There’s no question it’s popular—Chardonnay maintains its status as the most popular wine in the United States, a position it’s had for decades now. At the same time, particularly when I talk to wine drinkers who are younger than 30 or so, there’s no question that California Chardonnay isn’t at the top of the list when it comes to what’s cool; it’s considered the mom grape. Yet the terms people tend to use to define it—buttery, oaky, rich, unctuous—are actually becoming less and less applicable to most California Chardonnays. So when it comes to Chardonnay, what exactly is going on?

The answer is simple: Lots. I’d argue that California Chardonnay right now offers a greater range of styles than practically any other grape variety from the state. Fancy a razor-sharp, low-alcohol, cool-climate white that will snap you to attention with your platter of oysters? What about a bottle that can age in a cellar for 10 or 20 years, no less than a classic Cabernet? Or a single-vineyard wine that speaks transparently of the place it was grown? You can have any of those. Or you can have good old Cali Chard, luscious and full-bodied, with vanilla notes from oak and ripe, tropical fruit flavors, if you like. All of those wines are out there.

The truth is that Chardonnay—more than, say, Pinot Noir or Cabernet—is extraordinarily flexible. It grows well in a remarkably broad range of climates and soils, and it adapts well to any number of winemaking approaches. California winemakers know this, and, freed from many years of a market that demanded only ultra-unctuous, oaked-to-the-max whites, they’re striking out in every possible stylistic direction. Now is the time to follow their explorations.

RICH & LUSCIOUS
This is the style people think of when they think of California Chardonnay—opulent, full-bodied, with a clearly defined oak influence.

2017 Bogle Vineyards California Chardonnay ($10)
Widely available, with an easy-on-the-wallet price, this bottling from the Clarksburg, California–based Bogle family hits all the familiar chords and does so very well indeed. It offers a creamy texture, ripe fruit, and appealing, oak-driven vanilla notes.

2016 Buena Vista Winery Carneros Chardonnay ($20)
Founded in 1857, California’s oldest commercial winery has been given new life recently under French wine dynamo Jean-Charles Boisset. The Sonoma winery’s full-bodied Chardonnay rides along on ripe lemon and pineapple fruit.

2017 Black Stallion Napa Valley Heritage Chardonnay ($32)
Winemaker Rolf Haldenried’s opulent entry-level Chardonnay gets its vanilla-scented creaminess from being aged on its lees (spent yeasts from fermentation) for seven months in predominantly French oak barrels.

2017 Miner Napa Valley Chardonnay ($32)
Winemaker Stacey Vogel pulls back on the oak and ensures only 50% of this wine goes through malolactic fermentation, keeping it both zesty and rich. (This wine actually lives on the edge between our first two categories.)

2016 Beringer Private Reserve Napa Valley Chardonnay ($48)
A standard-bearer for the classic California style, Beringer’s Private Reserve bottling, launched in 1978, copies a luxurious texture with ripe peach and golden apple flavors and caramel-custard notes on the finish.
MEDIUM-BODIED & ELEGANT

With flavors typically leaning more toward citrus than tropical fruit, these Chardonnays walk a line between Old World (i.e., Burgundian) and New World (classic Californian) styles.

2017 VALRAVN SONOMA COUNTY CHARDONNAY ($30)
A light touch of oak—it’s there, but it lingers in the background—and fine-tuned acidity help this vibrant Chardonnay hover gracefully in the middle of richer barrel-fermented styles and the zing of cool-climate whites.

2017 SONOMA-CUTRER SONOMA COAST CHARDONNAY ($23)
This bottling is perfect for anyone who wants to bridge the gap separating rich Chardonnays and more elegant versions—in fact, I wavered on which category to put it in. There’s toasty oak here and plenty of ripe fruit, but vibrant acidity gives the wine surprising lift.

2017 JORDAN CHARDONNAY ($36)
Jordan’s age-worthy Chardonnay (the 2011 is lovely right now) is classically styled, but in a way that suggests the strengths of both California and Burgundy. Bright and crisp, its green-apple notes are subtly shaded by French oak.

2016 RAMYE RUSSIAN RIVER VALLEY CHARDONNAY ($42)
David Ramey is one of California’s acknowledged masters of Chardonnay. His single-vineyard bottlings are exquisite, and even his more widely available regional wines, like this focused, pear-scented bottling, have the ability to age in a cellar for years.

2016 DUMOL WESTER REACH CHARDONNAY ($50)
The top wine in a blind tasting of 17 Sonoma Chardonnays I participated in recently in California, Dumol’s Wester Reach is savory and complex, its firm acidity highlighting its exotic citrus (think yuzu), tree fruit (white peach), and spice flavors.
LEAN & RACY

Call this California’s new style. Minimal or no oak, low alcohol, and a focus on freshness make these zesty wines eye-openers for those yawning over the rich-and-ripe model.

2017 LIOCO SONOMA COUNTY CHARDONNAY ($22)
Chalky minerality, zero oak, and juicy-tart Meyer lemon flavors from a producer who’s been at the forefront of the move away from broader styles—this wine is a great introduction to the new face of California Chardonnay.

2016 MELVILLE ESTATE STA. RITA HILLS CHARDONNAY ($34)
A benchmark winemaker in California’s ocean-cooled Sta. Rita Hills appellation, northwest of Santa Barbara. Melville’s vivid estate Chardonnay has tart-but-ripe kumquat and lime notes that dissolve into a long, chalky finish.

2017 OCEANO COAST CHARDONNAY ($38)
This ultra-zesty white comes from vineyards practically a stone’s throw (albeit over a small mountain range) from the Pacific in San Luis Obispo County. Its exotic aroma—citrus blossoms and thyme—and seashell-mineral finish are distinctive and irresistible.

2017 KUTCH SONOMA COAST CHARDONNAY ($39)
Jamie Kutch has been making outstanding Pinot Noirs for over a decade now, and starting in 2014 he decided to apply his deft touch to Chardonnay as well, with impressive results. His 17 balances flinty intensity with lime and tangerine notes.

2016 STONY HILL VINEYARD CHARDONNAY ($54)
Founded in 1952, Stony Hill has always stuck to its pure and elegant style. With fine acidity and fresh pear-citrus flavors, its Chardonnays age superbly, taking on golden apple and spice notes; the 2016 should be no exception.