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TRAVELERS' TALES, FROM NEAR AND FAR

Edited by PETER TERZIAN

THE CASE FOR CHARDONNAY

Before rose hogat brose and prose, there was Chardonnay, America's favorite grape. *T+L* wine and spirits editor **RAY ISLE** heads to Sonoma County to find out how the passé variety got cool again.

4 Chardonnay
tasting of Sonoma
Wines, in
Healdsburg,
California.



• Sara Licklider, co-owner of Lico, in Healdsburg, leads a tasting.

• The vineyards at Stonestreet Winery, in Healdsburg.

HERE'S AN IDEA that's more subversive than it sounds: go to Sonoma County for a weekend of Chardonnay tasting. I know—Chardonnay, subversive? Come on. We all know that big, rich, oaky, buttery Chardonnay is the most popular and consequently

least cool wine on the planet—the mom wine, the drink no one touches at a dinner party. But the truth is that over the past several years Chardonnay has stopped being one of California's most predictable wines. It got a tattoo or two, acquired a little edge. And Sonoma County is right at the forefront of that change.

Admittedly, for most of the 20 years or so I've been visiting the region, Pinot Noir has been Sonoma County's big draw. It's also justly famed for its robust Cabernets and old-vine Zinfandels, many from vineyards planted in the 1930s or earlier. But now, it's Chardonnay that offers a whole new reason to book a trip. The number of ambitious winemakers I've come across recently who have been taking the grape into new realms is truly remarkable. Their versions are flinty, smoky, and focused more on balance and subtlety than in-your-face intensity.

Though the 2017 wildfires damaged only a handful of the county's more than 425 wineries, they dealt a huge blow to tourism in the region. That's a shame, because Sonoma has an abundance of excellent restaurants and hotels, in addition to endless swaths of stunning vineyards and some of the best wines on the planet. A visitor could easily spend weeks there, but even a three-day weekend is enough time for a worthy introduction to the Sonoma experience and this new wave of producers. A word of advice: book your winery visits in advance.

FRIDAY

From San Francisco International Airport it's a 90-minute drive north to the charming town of Healdsburg, in the heart of the Russian River Valley appellation. To put yourself in a new-style Chardonnay state of mind, head to **Lico** (liococvine.com), **Hirsch Vineyards** (hirschvineyards.com), and **Banshee Wines** (bansheewines.com), whose tasting rooms are all within walking distance of the tree-lined central square.

Banshee, in particular, operates in a casual, café-like mode; the space is decorated with retro vinyl records, quirky signage, and couches and barstools for sit-down tastings. "The new California Chardonnay style is all about finding that perfect balance between oak, fruit, acid, and minerality," owner Baron Ziegler says. "That's what we do, and I think it's also the future of Chardonnay in the state." Hirsch specializes in Pinots, but also makes a poised, fragrant





Chardonnay that's one of the county's best. Lioco has long been a pioneer of excellent, low-alcohol Chardonnays, like the subtle, layered Demuth Vineyard bottling.

Not all big-name wineries traffic in big-style, oaky Chardonnay. Drive north to **Jordan Winery** (jordanzinery.com), where Chardonnay has been made with an elegant restraint since the first harvest in 1979. Take the in-depth library tour, which often features an older Chardonnay along the way before ending in the cellar room with a tasting and a selection of local and French artisanal cheeses.

When you're ready for some downtime, check in to the **Farmhouse Inn** (farmhouseinn.com; double from \$495), on bucolic River Road in Forestville. Though siblings Joe and Catherine Bartolomei opened the property in 2001, it's still

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The swimming pool at the Farmhouse Inn, in Forestville.

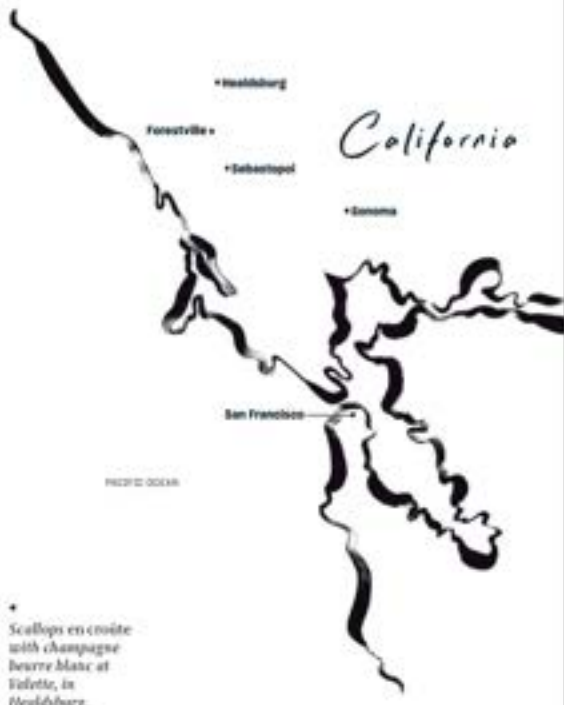
the most luxe destination in Sonoma County—helped by an \$8 million renovation a few years ago, which added nine guest rooms and a full-service spa. Tucked away in the trees, it has the feel of a serene private compound; the fresh flowers and enormous fireplaces in every room only add to the inviting atmosphere. Lounge by the pool and sip a glass of Chardonnay from Geoff Kruth and Megan Glaab's nearby winery, *Lost & Found*, until the sun starts to set, then relocate to the Michelin-starred restaurant for dinner. The wine list offers a chance to try excellent new Chardonnays from producers who aren't open to the public (usually because they're too small to employ full-time tasting-room staff). I recommend the minerally 2015 Peay Estate, one of the star vineyards of the Sonoma Coast, where cold ocean winds make for more intense wines.

As an alternative to the Farmhouse Inn, the newly renovated **MacArthur Place** (macarthurplace.com; doubles from \$509) is about a 50-minute drive south in the quaint town of Sonoma, within walking distance of the main square. It's easily the town's most significant hotel opening in decades. Rooms, which are filled with natural light, have enormous walk-in showers and bath amenities from organic fave Grown Alchemist. Chef Cole Dickinson's Mediterranean-influenced food at the property's *Layla* restaurant is top-notch. His *patatas bravas*, which take the form of crisp-fried, perfect cubes of potato drizzled with a whipped garlic aioli, are particularly addictive. You have been warned.

SATURDAY

Pop back into Healdsburg to visit **Ramey Wine Cellars** (rameywine.com). Winemaker Dave Ramey is one of the longtime wizards of California Chardonnay. His single-vineyard bottlings, like the 2013 Ritchie Vineyard Chardonnay, are some of the best in the state: complex, perfectly balanced, and beautifully aged.

A 20-minute drive south brings you to **Benovia Winery** (benoviacellars.com), set among the vineyards between Healdsburg and Sebastopol. There you'll find Mike Sullivan's 2017 Three Sisters Vineyard, which flirts with the idea of a rich, classic California Chardonnay before finishing firmly on vivid acidity and mineral notes. It's also worth booking a private tour of Heidi and Ted Lemon's **Littoral** (littoral.com), located just



★
Scallops en coque
with champagne
beurre blanc at
Valette, in
Healdsburg.

outside Sebastopol. You'll be able to experience firsthand the Lemons' remarkable skill at coaxing the distinctive character of the vineyards they work with into sublime wines.

Back in Healdsburg, right off the main square, **Valette** (valettehealdsburg.com; entrées \$28–\$42) is the namesake restaurant of hometown chef Dustin Valette. It's a must-visit for dinner, not only for its excellent house-made charcuterie and dishes like coriander-crust local duck breast but also for the superb, Sonoma-centric wine list. Get a bottle of Stonestreet's elegantly floral 2015 Upper Barn bottling, from one of California's most storied Chardonnay vineyards.

SUNDAY

Hit the southern side of the county with visits to California Chardonnay's past and future. **Hanzell Vineyards** (hanzell.com), about an hour from Healdsburg on a narrow, winding road just outside the town of Sonoma, was founded in 1953 by James D. Zellerbach, who later became the American ambassador to Italy. He modeled its façade on a historic building in Burgundy's legendary Clos de Vougeot vineyard, and his

Chardonnays were similarly inspired: they were the first in California made with Burgundian techniques like barrel aging. As the profound, quince-scented 2016 vintage shows, they're still among the best.

Next, head across town for Chardonnay's cutting edge at **Scribe Winery** (scribewinery.com). Bay Area millennials (and even a few non-millennials) flock to sibling duo Andrew and Adam Mariani's refurbished, 100-year-old Mission Revival hacienda, where you can chill out on the lawn sipping earthy, skin-fermented Chardonnay or relax at tables on the porch enjoying the snack menu. If you get there on a day when they're serving their killer fried chicken, count yourself lucky.

Of course, no three-day itinerary could cover all the exciting new-style Chardonnay producers in Sonoma. Among my favorites are **Ceritas** (ceritaswines.com), **Kutoh Wines** (kutohwines.com), **Red Car** (redcarwine.com), **Ernest Vineyards** (ernestvineyards.com), and **Cobb Wines** (cobbwines.com). The list is seemingly endless. And that's the thing about Sonoma—as soon as one visit ends, you're dreaming about the next one. ■