

Wine Spectator

California's Sleek 2013 Chardonnays

A long, cool growing season and a huge crop created challenges, but seasoned vintners came through with sumptuous wines

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A vintage with verve. That's what sets apart the 2013 harvest for California Chardonnay. Typically one of the Golden State's steadiest and most reliable wines year in, year out, Chardonnay delivers not only another strong vintage with 2013, but a highly distinctive one as well.

The reason is phenolics. This group of compounds, which are part of the same chemical family as tannins, impart a pithy citrus or Asian pear skin texture, and California winemakers say they figure strongly in the 2013 Chardonnays. Certainly the qualities attributed to phenolics are evident in many of the wines. This is a good marker for ageability and a useful indicator in deciding whether to cellar. Chardonnays age very well for three to five years, and the wines' edgier traits become rounder and smoother over time.

Since my last report ("California Chardonnay's Big Easy," July 31, 2014), I have reviewed nearly 500 new releases in our Napa office, more than half of them from 2013. The remainder are mostly from the 2012 vintage, whose record-size, slow-ripening crop yielded excellent wines as well. This means that despite stylistic differences between the two vintages, the overall quality of the wines covered in this report is consistently high.

If winemakers could channel their thoughts into one voice regarding 2013, it would sound something like this: This is a special vintage, whose even growing season and smaller, drought-induced crop—yielding smaller berries, higher acidities and deep concentration—produced a unique group of wines.

"2013 is a vintage that I would describe as both exhilarating and uneventful at the same time," says Bibiana González Rave of Cattleya Wines in Sonoma. "Mother Nature always has events. It's just that they were not so extreme this year."

The beauty of California Chardonnay is that you can drink well across a wide spectrum of prices. As summer arrives, Chardonnay becomes the go-to white for many wine drinkers. The onset of warm weather and the desire for something clean, fruity and refreshing can easily be met by this versatile grape. The 2013 vintage is awash with good values at \$25 or less, and if you're seeking richer, fuller wines, the sleepers are the 2012s, many of which are still being released or working their way to market.

With the lion's share of the 2013s yet to be released, 2012 is worth paying attention to right now, especially coming on the heels of the difficult 2011 vintage. The Sterling Napa Valley Reserve 2012 (94 points on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale, \$55), for example, may be the best Chardonnay ever made at this landmark Napa winery, which is staging a nice comeback in quality across its lineup. In a sign of the

overall reliability of the category, however, even 2011 managed to produce some stylish wines, including one of this report's top-scorers, the Mount Eden Vineyards Chardonnay Santa Cruz Mountains 2011 (95, \$60).

Many producers have both the 2012 and 2013 vintages for sale, and in terms of overall quality, it's a dead heat between them. Though many 2013s reach the top tier, this report's other highest-rated wines are all 2012s: the Peter Michael Knights Valley Point Rouge (97, \$185); Shibumi Knoll Russian River Valley Buena Tierra Vineyard (96, \$70); Kongsgaard Napa Valley The Judge (95, \$175); and Boars' View Sonoma Coast (95, \$125), a new wine from Fred and Carol Schrader in the Fort Ross-Seaview appellation.

With the 2013 vintage, the cream of the crop are almost all vineyard-specific bottlings from top sites. They stand out for their taut, dense and distinctive styles, ranging from trimmer, flintier versions, with minerally, gravelly notes, to bolder, more expressive and opulent renditions that stray into tropical flavors. Not to be outdone, the wines in the second tier show uncommon depth and purity. Though a cut below in quality, these wines won't disappoint, especially at their price points, which are slightly lower as well.

Among the highest-rated wines, Napa-based Jarvis Estate made three outstanding 2013s, each rating 92 points: the Napa Valley (\$64), Napa Valley Finch Hollow (\$115) and Napa Valley Finch Hollow Unfiltered (\$130). Lobo Wines made the Napa Valley Wulff Vineyards 2013 (92, \$60) from a vineyard that often goes into bottlings from Lewis Cellars. And Saxon Brown's Jeff Gaffner followed up his many successes in 2012 with outstanding 2013 Chardonnays under his own boutique Etre label—the Sonoma Coast (93, \$28)—and for Black Kite, the Sonoma Coast Gap's Crown Vineyard (93, \$45) and Santa Lucia Highlands Soberanes Vineyard (90, \$45).

"2013 has many of the hallmarks of a great vintage," says Mark Aubert, who turned out seven highly rated Chardonnays from vineyards throughout Sonoma and Napa. "Our Chards have the same richness and ripeness as previous vintages, but with a higher natural acid content. Therefore I have the best of both worlds, meaning these wines will age for a long, long time without a doubt. And to further matters, the juice yields were 10 percent higher than in 2012, which equals more of a good thing to go around."

Yet many of the winemakers I spoke with didn't experience higher yields; they describe 2013 as a smaller crop of superior quality. Ted Lemon of Littorai, for example, shares that perspective based on the wines he made from both Sonoma and Anderson Valley. "The 2013 Chardonnays are leaner and more racy than the 2012s, closer in style to 2008 and 2009, both of which are among our latter-day favorites," says Lemon. "The 2012s showed more richness at this stage of their development, whereas the acidity and a steely purity dominate the palate on the 2013s. What makes the latter fascinating is that there is a muscular dimension to the wines."

Lemon adds that the higher levels of phenolics in the 2013s, which can give them the kind of mouthfeel you get from a tangerine or pink grapefruit, might not be a trait everyone appreciates, but it is a good sign for the wines. "We believe that a gentle phenolic presence can be a very good thing in white wines, and these wines have that," he says. "We recently left bottles of each of the wines open and unprotected for several days in the family kitchen and they just got better and better. So we encourage [consumers] not to be in a rush to try them when they are shipped. Give them a chance to rest for several months. Expect these to age very well."

For Nick Morlet, winemaker at Peter Michael Winery in Sonoma's Knights Valley, the 2013 vintage will be hard to top. Following on the heels of Peter Michael's excellent showing in 2012, including this report's top-rated wine (the 97-point estate-bottled Point Rouge), Morlet oversaw four outstanding 2013 Chardonnays.

"Our 2013s display a lot of floral characteristics—white vine rose, jasmine—and with some notes of greengage plum, mineral elements and bright acidity, in addition to the classic aromatic profiles of our Chardonnay wines," Morlet says. "The wines are very well-balanced, with gras, finesse, bright natural acidity, mineral and a lingering finish." In short, he says, "They vibrate."

Part of Chardonnay's appeal for many vintners is that higher production levels are easier to achieve, and that in turn helps to hold prices in check. In addition, by avoiding French oak, winemakers eliminate the cost of new barrels, and pure, juicy, refreshing Chardonnays can be produced at affordable prices.

Consider Rombauer, which made 100,000 cases of its 2013 Carneros bottling, a 93-point wine that costs \$36. Another seven wines in this report earned outstanding marks of 90 points or higher and cost \$25 or less—including bottlings from Calera, Lafond, Meiomi and Rodney Strong—and at less than \$20, there are 88-point bottlings from Buehler, Edna Valley, Robert Mondavi and Sterling. Smoking Loon, Four Vines, Fetzer and Layer Cake even offer very good quality at \$12 or less.

If you're a Chardonnay lover, or looking for a complex, refreshing white for the hotter weather, this is the right time to get in the hunt.

Senior editor James Laube is Wine Spectator's lead taster on California Chardonnay.

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