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## ON WINE

# California Chardonnays: Ripe for Rediscovery or Just Overripe?

It's time to take another look at a wine both popular and maligned. Our wine columnist did and found a few crisp, bright, affordable bottles.



**FRUIT LOOP** For decades, California Chardonnays have had a reputation for being egregiously sweet and oaky. Is it time to take another look?

ILLUSTRATION: PEPE SERRA



By

[Lettie Teague](#)

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“**THERE IS NOTHING** wrong with California Chardonnay—it’s just what some people do to it that’s wrong.” This quote came from a winemaker who happens to be getting it right: Chris Brockway of Broc Cellars, based in Berkeley, Calif. I’d called him after tasting a group of California Chardonnays, of which at least half had been disappointing or worse.

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*Are you taking another look at California Chardonnay? Join the conversation below.*

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Though Mr. Brockway’s 2018 Brea Chard (\$20) was quite good, I couldn’t say the same for many others I tasted. I’d set out to survey California Chardonnays in the \$12 to \$25 range with fairly high hopes: This category has grown in popularity in recent years and also shifted stylistically, or so I’d been told. More winemakers are claiming to dial back the sweetness and the overuse of oak, promising fresher, brighter bottlings—more like a basic Bourgogne than the cocktail of wood and tropical fruit that a heavier hand can make of Chardonnay. I was also hoping to find

some good wines from small producers who might be struggling financially and could use a bit of a boost.

Happily I did uncover a few good bottles from smaller wineries, but I was surprised to find so many other wines lacking in balance and varietal character—some overly sweet or heavily alcoholic, others tasting chiefly of wood.

“There are very few wines that deliver high quality at a reasonable price,” said Central Coast producer Jim Varner. One such wine: his 2017 Foxglove Central Coast Chardonnay (\$17), a lithe bottling made from fruit sourced in Santa Barbara and Paso Robles.

The Foxglove label is the bargain sibling to Varner Wine, both of which are owned by Mr. Varner and his brother, Bob Varner. The Foxglove Chardonnay ferments in stainless-steel tanks. Jim Varner called excessive oak “a sign of self doubt” in a winemaker. “We don’t need to overdress our wine,” he said; indeed, it simply showcased the fruit. Mr. Varner and his brother were far ahead on the unadorned Chardonnay curve: They’ve been making their Foxglove Chardonnays since 1996—perhaps the peak of the oaky-Chardonnay era.

The Brea Chard, on the other hand, debuted less than 10 years ago. The 2018 I tasted is just the third vintage from its current vineyard source. The wine is a collaborative effort between Mr. Brockway and Tim Elenteny, a wine importer based in New York. They produce the wine from a vineyard in the Santa Lucia Highlands that Mr. Brockway has long admired. “Tim had approached me in 2013 about starting something together,” said Mr. Brockway. “I knew a

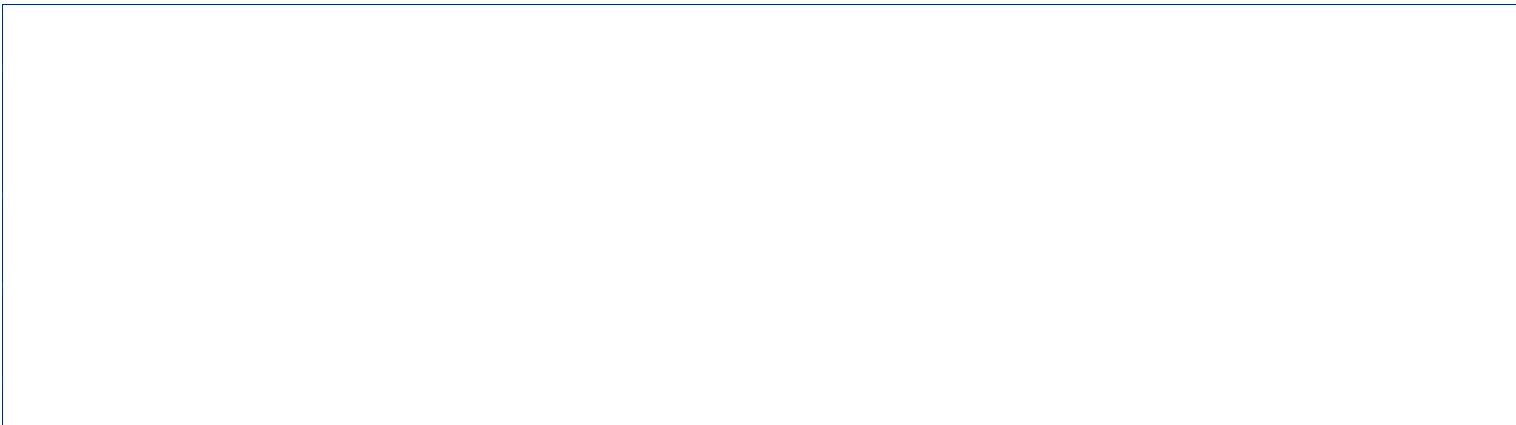
grower, Erin Phillips, who took over her father's vineyard." Ms. Phillips's vineyard was planted to Chardonnay—a grape that didn't fit the Broc Cellars profile. "But I always wanted to work with Erin," Mr. Brockway said. He liked the acid profile of the Chardonnay from her vineyard, and the fruit was affordable too. "It's not like Napa or Sonoma," he said.

**I had set out to survey California Chardonnays in the \$12 to \$25 range with fairly high hopes.**

Winemaker Ryan Hodgins of FEL Wines, in the Anderson Valley region of Mendocino County, also credited his location for the high quality and reasonable price of his 2018 FEL Chardonnay (\$20). "It's easier to make a good wine where I do," he said. "Fruit costs are lower." Mr. Hodgins sources from two of the best Anderson Valley vineyards for Chardonnay and Pinot Noir: Savoy and Ferrington. The FEL Chardonnay is a very mineral wine with a long clean finish. "I often say that it's a Chardonnay for people who don't like California Chardonnay," said Mr. Hodgins. He likened his wine to that classic, affordable white Burgundy, Mâcon-Villages.

Some winemakers have managed to secure well priced, quality fruit in Sonoma. Jeff Stewart, the longtime winemaker at Hartford Court winery in Sonoma's Russian River Valley, has access to some great old-vine Chardonnay vineyards. His long history with established growers put him in a fortunate position, said Mr. Stewart, who made time for our chat between Zoom meetings and virtual tastings.

The lush, beautifully balanced 2018 Hartford Court Russian River Valley Chardonnay (\$25), one of the top wines in my group, tasted like a wine at a higher price point. It's made from a mix of purchased and estate fruit, the latter sourced from Mr. Stewart's best Chardonnay vineyards.



Another wine that impressed me was the 2018 Union Sacré La Marianne Chardonnay (\$25) from Paso Robles. Although more tropical in style, with more new oak than the other wines I liked, it was also well balanced by a firm acidity. Like Mr. Brockway, Union Sacré winemaker Xavier Arnaudin found his way to Chardonnay by way of a specific vineyard—in this case, one belonging to his longtime friend Gary Burk, in the Santa Maria Valley. “I was focused on Alsace varieties like Riesling but Gary gave me the opportunity to buy his Chardonnay,” he said.

Mr. Arnaudin blended fruit from Mr. Burk's Gold Coast Vineyard with fruit from the Jespersen Ranch in Edna Valley, in even quantities. The former is a warm site, the latter, much cooler. “It is Meursault meeting Chablis!” wrote an enthusiastic Mr. Arnaudin, a native of France.

The rest of the Chardonnays I tasted were a mixed bag of wines from large corporations and tiny family-owned properties whose names I'll refrain from citing. While the former were largely formulaic—dosed heavily with oak chips and redolent of tropical fruit—the latter group disappointed me even more. I had hoped that small would mean higher quality. Instead these wines tasted as if the winemakers didn't know quite what to do. One wine had fearsome levels of acidity, a mid palate of tropical fruit and a hot, alcoholic finish. Another had a chemical aroma I couldn't quite place until I recognized it as a dead ringer for Elmer's glue.

As Mr. Brockway observed, Chardonnay is a malleable grape—and all too easy to distort. It's clearly tempted far too many winemakers to leave their mark, through excessive oak or otherwise. To them I would suggest adopting a mantra credited to the architect Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe: Less is more.

## **OAKY DOKEY / THESE CALIFORNIA CHARDONNAYS DO NOT DISAPPOINT**



## 1. 2018 FEL Chardonnay Anderson Valley \$20

Primarily sourced from two iconic Anderson Valley vineyards, Savoy and Ferrington, this is a zippy, zesty Chardonnay—made, according to winemaker Ryan Hodgins, to recall a good Mâcon-Villages from Burgundy.



## **2. 2018 Brea Chard \$20**

The name is as snappy as the wine itself: a crisp, clean, Chablis-style Chardonnay from a vineyard in the cool Santa Lucia Highlands. Highly regarded winemaker Chris Brockway of Broc Cellars produces this in collaboration with importer Tim Elenteny.

## **3. 2018 Union Sacré La Marianne Chardonnay \$25**

Named after Marianne, the personification of the French republic, this is a richer style of Chardonnay with a bit of new French oak and showing a bit of tropical fruit. It's all kept in balance by a corresponding bright acidity.

## **4. 2018 Hartford Court Russian River Valley Chardonnay \$25**

This lush, creamy wine could pass for a much pricier bottling. Marked by floral and citrus aromas and a firm mineral edge, it's aged in French oak and sourced from some of the winery's top Chardonnay vineyards.

## **5. 2017 Foxglove Central Coast Chardonnay \$17**

The second label of Varner Wine, Foxglove has long delivered good quality at very good prices. This Chardonnay is a straightforward, unadorned, minerally wine sourced from Santa Barbara and Paso Robles fruit.

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