

# No More Slingshots at Goliath



Jim Wilson/The New York Times

Akiko and Ken Freeman produce chardonnays at their winery in Sebastopol, Calif.

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**IF** you want to drop a conversational bomb among a collection of wine-lovers, simply say the words, "California chardonnay." Boom! Any hope of solidarity will be shattered as the group divides into fangs-bared pro and oh-so-con factions. For those inclined to be provocateurs, it's actually kind of fun to rev up a chardonnay dispute. But the truth is, chardonnay is no longer something to argue about. It is simply a fact to be accepted. Chardonnay is America's most popular and important white wine.

## **What the Stars Mean:**

(None) Pass It By

\* Passable

\*\* Very Good

\*\*\* Excellent

\*\*\*\* Extraordinary

Ratings reflect the panel's reaction to wines, which were tasted with names and vintages concealed. The panelists this week are Eric Asimov; Florence Fabricant;

Colin Alevras, the chef and an owner of the Tasting Room; and David Gordon, wine director at TriBeCa Grill. The tasted wines represent a selection generally available in good retail shops and restaurants. Prices are those paid in liquor shops in the New York region, over the Internet and from the vineyards themselves.

Tasting Coordinator: Bernard Kirsch

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Though chardonnay is here to stay, the *style* of California chardonnay is very much worth discussing, even to the point of contentiousness. Because, though vast amounts of chardonnay are produced each year, how that chardonnay will taste is very much up in the air and open to influence.

California chardonnay made its reputation on big, oaky, buttery wines that were about as subtle and quiet as a monster truck convoy, trumpeting flavors of tropical fruit, butterscotch and popcorn. Wines like these were popular, and critically acclaimed for their complexity. As table wines, though — something compelling to drink with a meal — these wines were largely disasters, flabby, sweet and overbearing.

But California has always had another strain of chardonnay, though in the 1980's and 90's it lurked somewhat beneath the sightlines. These chardonnays were more focused and concise, with more emphasis on mineral flavors and lively acidity than on a cornucopia of fruits. While critical praise focused on the other style, more of these leaner California chardonnays were around than you might think, from producers like Stony Hill, Hanzell, Forman, Au Bon Climat, Mount Eden, Chalone and Chateau Montelena, just to name a few.

In the way of all things, the pendulum in the last few years has been swinging perceptibly away from the big, blousy chardonnays and toward the tighter, leaner kind. It may not be evident by looking at lists of the country's most popular wines, or by checking the selection at Safeway or Trader Joe's. But the leading edge is inclined in that direction.

In an effort to detect how this inclination manifested itself in our own marketplace, the Dining section's wine panel held its finger up to the chardonnay wind recently to see how it was blowing. We decided to focus on two somewhat overlapping appellations in Sonoma County, the Russian River Valley and the Sonoma Coast. For the tasting, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by Colin Alevras, the chef and an owner of the Tasting Room in the East Village, and David Gordon, wine director at TriBeCa Grill.

We chose these appellations because they have been two of the prime sources in recent years for some of the best and most interesting California chardonnays. The weather tends to be cooler, especially near the Pacific coast, than in, say, Napa Valley, and as a result the grapes often ripen with greater acidity and less-elevated sugar contents than in warmer regions. But you can't always tell from the label where the grapes were grown.

Many American Viticultural Areas, as the American appellations are formally called, are unwieldy designations, with boundaries chosen for political reasons rather than because they circumscribe areas with discrete characteristics of climate and soil. The Sonoma Coast region stretches way too far inland, for example, lumping vineyards east of Highway 101 with those actually near the coast, from as far north as Annapolis to as far south as Occidental. Meanwhile, the Russian River appellation meanders west from Santa Rosa and Healdsburg, following the river to the Pacific, crossing over other appellations like Green Valley, Chalk Valley and Sonoma Coast.

Nonetheless, we did our best, and after foraging through the local retail shops we came away with 17 Russian River Valley chardonnays and 8 from the Sonoma Coast. Eighteen of the wines were split equally between the 2003 and 2004 vintages, with another six coming from 2002 and one from 1999.

Regardless of where it comes from, good chardonnay needs to have lively acidity and great texture. They give the wine shape and structure.

Our top two wines, the 2003 Freeman, from the Heintz Ranch near Occidental on the Sonoma Coast, and the 2003 Londer, from the Kent Ritchie Vineyard near Freestone, also on the Sonoma Coast, both exhibited hybrid characteristics, combining the rich, ripe fruit typical of many California chardonnays with a core of acidity that helps to focus and define the wine.

Several bottles in our top 10 exhibited a leaner style, with some pronounced mineral characteristics that I found very attractive. These included the 2002 Sebastopol from Dutton Ranch in the Russian River Valley, the unoaked 2004 Oro de Plata from Keller Estate on the Sonoma Coast; the 2003 Two-Rock Vineyard from Gallo of Sonoma, on the southern end of the Sonoma Coast appellation; and the 2004 Russian River Ranches from Sonoma-Cutrer.

That the Sonoma-Cutrer actually takes the Sonoma Coast appellation illustrates some of the issues with the designation. The grapes come from five different vineyards. Four are in the Russian River Valley, and the fifth is near the Carneros region, inland. But the wine qualifies for the catchall Sonoma Coast on the label. Go figure.

As is true all over California, many of the best Sonoma Coast and Russian River Valley chardonnays are hard to find. A partial list of producers that I would seek out, but that we could not find for our tasting, would include Peay Vineyards, Littorai, Neyers, Rochioli and Kistler.

Some of the bigger names that were in our tasting but that did not make our cut included the 2003 Flowers Andreen-Gale from the Sonoma Coast, the 1999 Williams Selyem from the Allen Vineyard in the Russian River Valley, and the 2003 DuMol from the Russian River Valley. One particular favorite of mine, the 2002 Porter Creek from George's Hill in the Russian River Valley, did not make the cut because the bottle was corked.

Nonetheless, I found the tasting an encouraging sign that California chardonnays are drifting over from the dark side.

## **Tasting Report: California Sippin'**

### **Freeman Sonoma Coast Heintz Ranch 2003**

\$40

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Big, rich, deep and very ripe; California style, but not over the top.

### **Londer Vineyards Sonoma Coast Kent Ritchie Vineyard 2003**

\$44

\*\*1/2

A hefty, full-bodied wine with rich pear and fig flavors, good acidity and well-integrated oak.

### **Sebastopol Russian River Valley Dutton Ranch 2002**

\$30

\*\*1/2

Burgundian in style, with more emphasis on mineral flavors than on fruit.

### **Lynmar Russian River Valley 2004**

\$40

\*\*1/2

Full-flavored and rich with long, lingering flavors; a touch of sweetness.

## **BEST VALUE**

### **Sonoma-Cutrer Sonoma Coast Russian Hill Russian River Ranches 2004**

\$20

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**Lean and fresh, with persistent citrus and mineral flavors.**

### **Russian Hill Russian River Valley Gail Ann's Vineyard 2002**

\$30

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**Lush and toasty, with a bright core of lively fruit.**

**Gallo of Sonoma Sonoma Coast Two-Rock Vineyard 2003**

**\$25**

**\*\***

**Balanced and lighter-bodied, with pure, well-focused flavors.**

**Keller Estate Sonoma Coast Oro de Plata 2004**

**\$30**

**\*\***

**Fresh and lively, with floral and mineral flavors.**

**Fritz Russian River Valley 2004**

**\$20**

**\*\***

**Very ripe, with coconut and other tropical fruit flavors;  
lingering heat.**

**Dehlinger Russian River Valle 2003**

**\$50**

**\*\***

**Funky aromas, yet well-balanced and rich with good acidity.**