

LIBATIONS

Raising a glass to distinctive chardonnays



WINE, ETC.

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and Patrick
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We often hear from friends and neighbors who say they would drink red wine before they would drink chardonnay. So many people say they have grown tired of one of the most venerable white grapes in the world and have

moved on to pinot grigio, but in reality chardonnay is still the top-selling white wine. So, what is it about chardonnay that is so easy to dislike?

When it comes to allegiance, wine consumers can behave like squirrels reacting to an oncoming car. They dart left and right, reacting more to whim than wisdom. Even with the fickle behavior of consumers to blame, chardonnay producers haven't done themselves any favors either. Chardonnay has gone through more trends than Christian Dior. There was the oak trend, the lush trend and, more recently, the sweet trend. Today, thank heavens, chardonnay is coming back to center. The best chardonnays are more balanced, crisp and unadorned.

Chardonnay is one of the most versatile, food-friendly wines. We often pit them with other white wines when serving seafood and fowl. They have more body and texture than, say, pinot grigio and sauvignon blanc.

We recently have tasted a number of single-vineyard chardonnays that seem to be more focused on terroir and less generic than the mass-produced chardonnays that are blends of several vineyards and regions. Frankly, we don't get much personality from a "central coast" chardonnay that can source grapes from vineyards miles apart.

Steve **MacRostie** of Sonoma County's MacRostie Winery and Vineyards appreciates what a vineyard can bring to chardonnay. For years he used several

vineyards in his blended chardonnay, but in 2001 he produced his first chardonnay exclusively from a newly purchased Wildcat Mountain vineyard.

"We wanted to let the site speak for itself," he said. "It isn't necessary better — but more distinctive."

He's added several other vineyard-designated chardonnays using purchased grapes from renowned vineyards, such as Dutton, Sangiacomo and Martinielli.

The quality and distinction of these chardonnays are very good.

Winemakers have a lot of tools at their disposal to craft chardonnay. Once they grapes are crushed they can cool fermentation, convert the malo acids to softer lactic acids, add oak, and stir the lees. But they first need to start with good grapes and that comes from specific vineyards.

MacRostie says vineyard location is even more important than clones. His 58-acre Wildcat Mountain vineyard is divided into five lots, each producing a different kind of fruit character.

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Several favorite chardonnays:

■ **MacRostie Wildcat Mountain Vineyard Chardonnay 2012 (\$38).** We loved the generous aromas in this estate-made wine. Once you linger over the jasmine and honey aromas, you pick up rich tropical fruit flavors and lingering finish. The wine has enough acidity to complement food but also a richness on the finish.

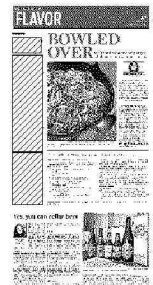
■ **MacRostie Sangiacomo Vineyard Chardonnay 2012 (\$44).** A little bigger in style, the Sangiacomo chardonnay has more oak notes and a mineral thread to keep it interesting.

Here are some other chardonnays, few of which are single-vineyards:

■ **Murphy-Goode Single Deck Chardonnay 2013 (\$30).** Winemaker David Ready Jr. loves to name his wines after playing cards and poker. The Single Deck uses grapes from the producer's Kelli Anne Vineyard. The wine has opulent tropical fruit notes with a dash of vanilla and oak.

■ **Flora Springs Chardonnay Napa Valley Barrel Fermented 2013 (\$35).** This beauty offers an intriguing toasty tropical fruit nose with pineapple notes dominating. Ripe papaya and pineapple flavors in an elegant toasty oak frame. It is very smooth and has a nice light creamy finish.

■ **Gary Farrell Vineyards Russian River Selection Chardonnay 2012 (\$35).** Apple



and citrus aromas give way to a tropical fruit and almond flavor with a touch of butterscotch from the oak. Those of you who like your chardonnay creamy and oaky will like this one.

■ Kendall-Jackson Vintner's Reserve Chardonnay 2013 (\$17). There is good reason K-J does so well with its chardonnay. It is very clean, well made, balanced and delicious. Grapes for this wine come from five counties, so don't expect something site specific.

■ William Hill Estate Napa Valley Chardonnay 2013 (\$27). With lots of malolactic fermentation and sur lie aging this wine is creamy and opulent. It features ripe tropical fruit flavors.

■ Murphy- Goode Island Block Chardonnay Alexander Valley 2013 (\$26). This beauty that exhibits an enticing honey/floral nose was aged in French oak barrels. Very round, smooth and unctuous in the mouth with tropical fruit flavors and toasty notes, it is absolutely delicious!

Tom Marquardt is the retired editor and publisher of Capital Gazette Communications. Patrick Darr works in the local wine retail business. Some of the reviewed wines were provided as samples by the producers. To reach the authors, or get help in finding a wine, go to their website, www.moreabout-wine.com.