

## **Wine, etc.: Try these 14 reasonably priced, good chardonnays**

By Tom Marquardt and Patrick Darr

August 16, 2016

Try as they may, no white grape variety has been able to knock chardonnay from its throne as this country's reigning white wine. Not that the grape has been spared abuse over the years — like any incumbent, chardonnay is constantly defending its record and bending to the fickle palates of demanding consumers. You just can't knock the mighty chardonnay off its pedestal.

Chardonnay's history as a noble grape starts in Burgundy where for centuries it has fostered some of the world's most luxurious wines. Seeking to emulate its success, just about every New and Old World wine growing regions has attempted to fashion its chardonnay in a similar style.

But different climates and soils often frustrate their efforts. You just can't grow burgundy in Spain, California or anywhere else.

Over the years we have been lucky to taste great burgundy and while it sometimes fails to live up to high expectations, the best ones are among the highlights of our tasting career. Taste a Montrachet and you will understand.

The consumer faces a mine field when searching for the right chardonnay. Prices wildly range from \$15 to \$100 — even higher for great burgundy. What makes one more expensive than the other?

Higher priced wines are generally sourced from unique vineyards and are more complex because of oak and bottle aging. Inexpensive chardonnays come from appellations as broad as "California," and are blends of several regions and vineyards. On top of prices, styles can range from oak to unoaked, buttery to austere, simple to complex.

Although most French burgundies are ridiculously expensive, there are values to be found in the region. We recently tasted through a series of reasonably priced chardonnays from Maison Joseph Drouhin. Ranging in price from \$13 to \$20, these cleanly made and balanced French chardonnays are great for patio sipping. Look for the Drouhin chardonnays from Macon-Villages and Saint Veran.

Here are some excellent chardonnays that are reasonably priced for what they deliver:

- La Follette North Coast Chardonnay 2013 (\$20). We like this reasonably priced chardonnay for what it doesn't have: oak, full malolactic fermentation, imbalance. Instead, year after year, Greg La Follette sticks to an unadorned, balanced and food-friendly style. Bright acidity, pear and apple flavors.
- Maison Joseph Drouhin Macon-Villages 2014 (\$13.50). Every time we drink this chardonnay from France's massive Maconnais region we marvel at its value. Clean, pure fruit character, medium body, lean acidity and crisp apple and mineral flavors.

- Stoller Family Estate Dundee Hills Chardonnay 2015 (\$25). From Oregon's fertile Dundee Hills, this unoaked chardonnay is one of best in its price category. A beautifully vibrant chardonnay, it is a great match to seafood and is an equally good aperitif. Bright acidity, citrus aromas and flavors. For a real treat, Stoller makes a 2014 reserve chardonnay (\$35) that has great complexity, layered fruit and a lingering finish. It's guaranteed to be the star of any dinner.
  
- MacRostie Sonoma Coast Chardonnay 2014 (\$25). Steve MacRostie has made chardonnay the name of his game by using several excellent vineyards in Sonoma County. This introductory chardonnay sets the foundation for his single-vineyard chardonnays from Wildcat Mountain (\$40) – our favorite – and an austere, food-friendly Dutton Ranch (\$46). Pineapple aromas give way to a softly textured wine with balanced acidity in the Sonoma Coast version.
  
- Chappellet Napa Valley Chardonnay 2014 (\$35). We liked the clove and nutmeg nuances to this apple/pear flavored chardonnay. Good mineral notes and velvety texture.
  
- King Estate Chardonnay 2014 (\$18). This softly textured Oregon chardonnay has distinctive tropical fruit and pear flavors with crisp acidity, a lingering finish and traces of oak and vanilla. Excellent value for a full-bodied chardonnay.
  
- Landmark Vineyards Overlook Chardonnay 2014 (\$25). Apricot flavors and a honey tone give this Sonoma County chardonnay a round, delicious feel.
  
- Wente Eric's Chardonnay 2014 (\$25). We've been steady fans of Wente's reasonably priced Morning Fog Chardonnay (\$15), but recently enjoyed this version named after fourth-generation winegrower Eric Wente. We guess he finally got his way with his siblings to make a chardonnay he could call his own. It is unoaked and thus more food-friendly. Wente is a leader in sustainable farming.
  
- Columbia Crest Grand Estates Chardonnay Columbia Valley 2013 (\$15). Another winner from the Columbia Crest Grand Estates group. Beautiful tropical fruit of mango and pineapple wafts from the glass and fills the mouth. A toasty buttery oak frame completes the package to this amazing value.
  
- Tom Gore California Chardonnay 2014 (\$16). Winemaker Tom Gore calls himself a farmer first and indeed that's a compliment for winemakers who needs good fruit to make good wine. This chardonnay has generous apple and pineapple notes and a dose of oak to keep it focused. Rich texture.
  
- Ghost Pines Chardonnay 2014 (\$20). Reasonably priced, this blend of chardonnay grapes from three counties offers pear flavors with a hint of cinnamon and vanilla.
  
- Frank Family Vineyards Carneros Chardonnay 2014 (\$35). Using grapes from several Carneros vineyards, this tasty gem has great body and round texture. Tropical fruit flavors abound.
  
- Hess Select Monterey Chardonnay 2014 (\$13). A good value, this basic chardonnay has balance with moderate acidity, clean lime, apple and tropical fruit flavors.
  
- Duckhorn Napa Valley Chardonnay 2014 (\$35). From a venerable, respected producer, this chardonnay is a good value at \$35. Full-bodied, apple and vanilla aromas, and smooth peach and citrus flavors with a good dose of oak.

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