

Robb Report

FOOD & DRINK / WINE

AUGUST 14, 2025

The 50 Greatest California Chardonnays of the 21st Century So Far

The very best the Golden State has had to offer the last 25 years.

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While Chardonnay's history in Burgundy harkens back to the 12th century, its timeline in California is significantly shorter, having been cultivated there for less than 175 years. The world's most widely grown white grape's legacy in the Golden State is intertwined with that of its home country: The first documented planting in California, by Charles Wetmore in 1852, was of cuttings imported from Meursault. In 1896, Paul Masson started a vineyard in the Santa Cruz Mountains using vines from Burgundy, and in 1912 Ernest Wente acquired cuttings from the University of Montpellier and planted them on his family's land in Livermore Valley. It is said that today more than 75 percent of all the Chardonnay in the United States is Wente Clone stock descended from those plantings.

France once again had a hand in the story of Chardonnay from the Golden State in 1976, when 1973 Chateau Montelena Chardonnay took first place at the Judgment of Paris, the now-famous tasting that pitted American wines against those from France. Although in the first half of the 20th century most wine from California was not labeled using the name of the variety, news of the American wines' victory over France's shone a spotlight on the quality of wine from California as well as the newly popular practice of selling and ordering wine by the name of the variety rather than the region it hails from, which is a decidedly New World convention. California Chardonnay was on its way.

Both Chardonnay and California wine's popularity have steadily risen in the last 49 years, and at the same time the quality of the offerings and number of producers in the state has grown considerably as well. Although any grape you can name is planted somewhere in California, Chardonnay remains the top variety across the state. While compiling this list we looked to the best examples of the variety that we have tasted for our roundups and articles in the last several years and we also went back to our archives for the finest Chardonnays from earlier in the century. We have been writing about wine for almost two decades and have been visiting California wine country for over 25 years. One stroke of luck is that we are both ardent note-takers and for more than a decade—since we began working on our 2014 book *Wines of California*—we both record our tasting notes on our laptops and phones, so we have a digital record of our impressions.

When we ranked our 50 Greatest Cabernet Sauvignons last year, we focused exclusively on Napa Valley, but for Chardonnay we cast a wider net, so this list also includes examples from Sonoma, Sta. Rita Hills, and in the case of Ridge, Santa Cruz Mountains. Within Napa there are several outstanding examples from Carneros, the southernmost AVA in the valley, whose proximity to San Pablo Bay offers cooling nighttime breezes to maintain freshness and acidity. Within Carneros, Hyde Vineyard deserves a special shoutout as the home of five wines on this list including three in the top 10. While Carneros (which straddles Napa and Sonoma) was once considered the coldest vineyard spot in the area, it has been supplanted by Sonoma AVAs such as Russian River Valley, Sonoma Coast, and West Sonoma Coast, which have contributed significantly to the quality of Chardonnay in California. We also have to give props to Russian River Valley's Ritchie Vineyard, the source of three bottles on this list. While 25 years ago oaky, buttery Chardonnay was the norm, giving dominance to warmer-weather Napa, as consumer tastes have shifted towards a fresher style, colder weather regions (including high altitude mountainside sites in Napa) have become more important for the production of fine Chardonnay.

Scattered among the famous names that fetch a small fortune for their bottles, you will find choices from small family-owned wineries whose expertise and passion are revealed in every sip. We took a variety of qualities into consideration when deciding on inclusion, but the most important thing is taste—the actual flavor of the wine in combination with texture, acidity, and finish. While the majority were tasted in comparative tastings with similar wines, some were enjoyed at professional tastings at wineries, at dinner with winemakers, or opened by friends. With a lot of research and an equal amount of consideration we have chosen the 50 Greatest California Chardonnays of the 21st Century So Far.

46 **Knights Bridge Winery 2008 West Block Chardonnay** **Sonoma**



One of just two brick-and-mortar wineries in the Knights Valley AVA in northeast Sonoma, Knights Bridge was founded in 2006. Among its first releases, this beautiful estate Chardonnay showed off citrus and orchard fruit flavors wrapped in twin sheaths of acidity and minerality.